NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan

Dhamma teachings by Noirin Sheahan (Satipañña)

Noirin Sheahan

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CHAPTER 1

70th Birthday Reflection — A Spiritual Journey from Rosary to Dhamma

Noirin Sheahan · 30 min

In this 70th birthday reflection, Noirin Sheahan traces her remarkable spiritual journey from childhood rosary prayers in 1950s Ireland to finding her true calling in the Buddha's Dhamma. Beginning with formative experiences of Catholic devotion and a profound childhood insight that brought both spiritual opening and paralyzing guilt, she shares how early meditation practice through the rosary planted seeds that would later flourish in Buddhist practice.

Noirin candidly recounts the challenges that shaped her path: her mother's bipolar depression, the devastating loss of her brother Conor, career disappointments, failed relationships, and a midlife mental health crisis. She describes how discovering 'The Tao of Physics' opened her to Eastern meditation, leading to her first encounters with Bhante Bodhidhamma and the Dublin meditation sangha in the 1980s.

The heart of her reflection centers on a profound insight experience during retreat that revealed the truth of anattā (not-self), triggering intense fear but ultimately deepening her faith in the Dhamma. She describes how this awakening, though frightening, transformed her relationships and brought genuine happiness rooted in understanding dukkha and the possibility of liberation. Her journey includes facing throat cancer, caring for her aging mother with newfound ease, and eventually finding her spiritual home at Satipanya during the COVID lockdown.

This intimate autobiography offers inspiration for anyone navigating spiritual seeking, mental health challenges, and the quest for authentic meaning in life.

Three score years and ten. How did it come about that I should spend twelve hours of my seventieth birthday sitting in silence or taking baby footsteps around a house in Portugal and then come back here to Satipanya to celebrate my official birthday with all of you?

I think it traces back to summer holidays in my granny's house in Cork and the habit of the family rosary. Everyone gathered in the evening, knelt down and said the prayer together. Ireland in the 1950s was very much a Catholic country and Sunday mass and

confession and so on were a big part of life. I don't think many families still kept up the practice of the daily rosary, but I'm very grateful that it was still alive in my granny's house while I was a child.

The rosary is a prayer that takes about fifteen minutes. There are five mysteries to contemplate, each one a different scene from the life of Christ or from his death and resurrection and beyond. Somehow it clicked with me to hold an image in the imagination of saying a very simple, repetitive prayer. It gave me a way of taking to heart what was taught as truly important and fundamental in life. It was a form of meditation bringing my mind to a quiet place where I could sense some connection with deeper truth.

After the holidays, my mum, dad and brother Conor and I went back to Dublin. We didn't say the family rosary at home. It obviously didn't mean much to my mum or dad, and definitely not to my brother Conor. He was a carefree and wild child, always getting into some sort of trouble, whereas I was dreamy. At least, that's how my granny described me, and I think she was right.

So maybe because I liked dreamy images from the life of Christ, I continued the rosary on my own, though snuggled up in bed rather than on my knees on the cold floor. Climbing into bed, I'd be grumbling that I'd much prefer to daydream than say the rosary. But I'd make a bargain with myself to say just one mystery and then daydream. But when I got to the end of that first mystery, I decided to do a second and then daydream, and so on, till I got through all five. By that time, sleep beckoned, and I no longer had the energy to bother daydreaming.

In retrospect, I'm very grateful for the family rosary practice, both because it put some limit on my habit of daydreaming, and because it was my first taste of meditation, a quieting of the mind as it opens in awe. I lost the habit as I grew older. Though I have no memory of deciding to stop, it may have been after what you might call my first spiritual insight, which came when I was eight.

I was praying one evening when I suddenly knew that there was a presence beside and around me that was separate to me. It seemed to drop like a thud into my mind. One moment I was the only one in the room, then suddenly there was also this mysterious presence, which I took to be God. While I didn't feel God's presence was threatening, I didn't feel it as loving either. It was just there, other.

The main way it affected me was to show me that I'd been making this big mistake, that all my thoughts of God and my prayers had all been make-believe, that I'd never known God till now. Maybe I got myself mixed up with the idea of false gods from the first of the Ten Commandments. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thou shalt not put false gods before me."

To my mind, I had committed a dreadful sin, made up a false image of God. The guilt multiplied with the judgement that I'd never said any proper prayers in my life. Hundreds and hundreds of sins. And because I'd never confessed these, I'd made bad confessions, each one a mortal sin. And then I'd compounded that problem by going to communion with the mortal sin of a bad confession on my soul. And so I'd made bad communions, more mortal sins. Within a few minutes, I'd clocked up several hundred mortal sins, because in those days you went to confession and communion every week.

The reason I know I was eight when this happened is because I had to multiply my two mortal sins per week for my bad confession and bad communion, by fifty-two for every year since my first communion, which was when I was five. Then I had to add in extra bad confessions and bad communions for all the feast days and Christmas days. And I found even more as I scoured through my little green catechism to be sure I'd got them all multiplied up correctly before my next confession.

I imagine I stopped saying the rosary after that. There couldn't have been any joy or peace in it. Although the guilt probably undermined me subconsciously, the episode didn't mark my life at the surface level, which was a good thing. Beyond making sure I got to confession as soon as possible to get all my sins forgiven, I don't remember thinking about it much and I doubt anyone in the family or among my friends knew anything had happened. So that was the first phase of my religious life: meditation, devotion, mystery, a thought of insight and then a plunge into guilt.

In many ways, I had a happy childhood. My brother Conor was just a year older and we were very close. There were dozens of children our age living nearby, so always someone to play with. My dad worked as a weather forecaster at the airport and we didn't have financial problems. However, there was always a background anxiety hanging over us because my mother had bipolar depression. It was first diagnosed as postnatal depression after Conor was born and then again after my birth. In those days, there was no psychotherapy available, or even much kindness in psychiatric practice. Just electric shock treatment and heavy sedation. And so she never really recovered.

For much of our childhood, she was in bed and very depressed. And every six months or so, she would have an acute flare-up and get into rows with family or neighbours until eventually she had to be admitted to hospital again for more ECT and seda-

tion. While she was in hospital, myself and my brother would stay with cousins, sometimes both at the one house, sometimes split up. At the time, I didn't see this as a problem. I liked my cousins and enjoyed staying with them. But I know now that my mother's illness took a toll at a deeper level and underlay my later midlife crisis and the fear that suddenly emerged during a retreat in 1999.

Another major sorrow was that Conor's wildness caught up with him just after he turned eighteen. He went out to a dance one Saturday night and never came home. He was killed in a road accident. That was a devastating blow for all the family, as you can imagine. But life went on.

Although I had lost the habit of the rosary, I never lost the sense of mystery that it kindled. There was a strong wish to understand the deeper truths of life, which was why I opted to study physics after school, on the assumption that understanding the basic laws of physics meant I would understand life itself and be happy. But even before I finished college, I realised I was onto the wrong track. Nothing I was learning was helping me understand life better or be any happier.

Though that was disappointing, there were lots of compensations. The physics class was small, only twelve of us, and we made good friends, hiking over mountains at the weekends, renting cottages in the country during holidays, playing tennis into the long summer evenings, frantic study before the exams, and of course, many pints of creamy Guinness to help us to put the world to rights. When I started college, a pint cost eighteen pence. By the time I finished, it had gone up to a staggering twenty-three pence. So college was a wonderful experience and our physics class still gets together frequently. In fact, we're having a collective seventieth birthday party next month as we've all reached this milestone during the year.

After college, I did a teacher training course only to discover that teaching was not for me either. At a bit of a loose end for a while, I was delighted to discover that there was a career called medical physics and jobs in this area in most big hospitals. The delight was from the thought that even though I might not understand life deeply, I could contribute meaningfully to it.

My first job was in London in the Royal Free Hospital with a team who were researching lung function and especially the role of aerosols in diagnosis and in treatment. It was a dream start, a small friendly team, enthusiastic about work, curious to try new techniques, a very happy work environment. Plus a deepening relationship with Adrian, who I had met during the teacher training course. We were well suited and happy until my mother suddenly took a dislike to him. Once there was talk of the relationship becoming serious and him buying a house, he suddenly became, in her

eyes, not good enough for me. And the sad thing was that I hadn't anchored myself enough to withstand her disapproval. Once she lost confidence in him, I lost confidence in him. The joy in the relationship went out and eventually we broke up.

In retrospect, I can see that this failure to define myself as separate to my mother left me with a lot of bitterness and self-doubt. But, as always, life went on. And after three years at the Royal Free, I came back to Dublin in my mid-twenties, working in a number of different hospitals, until I took early retirement in 2007, aged fifty-three.

The first decade or so was a happy time. Friendly colleagues, stimulating work with lots of fascinating research, enough challenges to make things interesting, enough routine to keep me grounded. I made good friends. We played tennis, squash, went hill walking, hired cottages together for holidays.

In retrospect, the most important incident was when colleagues gave me the book, The Tao of Physics, by Fritjof Capra. This linked modern physics with Eastern mysticism and opened up a whole new world for me. I was overjoyed to realise there was another way of understanding life that didn't involve maths and physics, but meditation. I found D.T. Suzuki's Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, and started practising meditation. A while later, I found a meditation group and another chapter in life opened up.

Weekly meetings, Dhamma study, retreats, and perhaps most important of all, close friendship with others in the group. We're still good friends to this day. One claim to fame for our little group was that we can say we discovered Bhante Bodhi Dhamma, invited him to teach his first ever retreat in Dublin back in the mid-1980s, and he came back for several years afterwards to teach weekend retreats. Our group was also party to his first ten-day retreat, which was held in Kerry in the late 1980s.

For a decade or more, I couldn't make up my mind between Buddhism and Christianity. I think some of it stemmed from fear of damnation, because I was now definitely putting a false god before the true god of the catechism. And some was the sense of identity with the Christian story. I really wanted to believe it all, whereas the Buddha and the vague notion of enlightenment didn't appeal to me at that personal story level. I did quite a number of silent meditation retreats with the Carmelite Order, as well as the weekends with Bhante or other Buddhist teachers, and found both forms to be very helpful and inspiring.

The main attraction of Buddhism for me was the friendship group. They were my own age, good fun, open to questions. We used to go out hill walking together, went away on skiing holidays, celebrated Christmas and birthday parties. On the other hand,

the people I met at the Catholic retreats were usually much older than me, more settled in life and more pious than questioning. So there wasn't much discussion and I never developed any friendships.

I am so grateful that the spiritual aspect of my life opened up because as middle age approached, the lights went out in other areas. After the disappointment over Adrian, I never again managed to form a committed relationship and the fun went out of medical physics once I became senior, had to take responsibility for services.

It came to a head in my mid-forties while I was also doing a course in the spiritual exercises of Ignatius Loyola, a form of spiritual training in daily life developed by the Jesuits. The course is well known for making people more vulnerable than usual. And in my case, this, along with a combination of work stress and unexpected relationship issues, brought on a mental health crisis. I couldn't sleep, couldn't stop crying, couldn't find anything to believe in.

I offered to hand in my resignation at work, but the hospital was very decent. They could see I was unwell and persuaded me to take six months off to think about things and then make a decision. During those months, as I looked back on life, it seemed to me that the only thing that hadn't let me down was meditation practice. Career and relationships just seemed burdensome now. Family held no joy at all.

Although I had loved my father very much and we played bridge together for many years, he had died when I was thirty and my relationship with my mother, never strong to start with, went further downhill after that. I did have good friends from college days and from work and from my meditation group and they were a support but not a reason to live. The only thing that offered hope was the spiritual realm. I'd lost confidence in the world. And so I made the decision that from now on, spiritual development would be my principal aim in life. Everything else would come secondary to it.

Being realistic, I knew I didn't have what it would take to head off into the hills as a hermit. I was too old, forty-five at that stage, to be taken in as a novice nun. Also, the recent breakdown showed me I needed to be gentle with myself, not expect too much, take baby steps rather than giant leaps.

So I changed my work arrangement at the hospital, took a part-time appointment at basic grade level so that I wouldn't have so much responsibility and could organise my work time so as to take months off as needed for retreat and then work full-time between retreats. This gave me the means to support myself financially as well as the time needed for spiritual development.

Although I was still undecided between Christianity and Buddhism, this decision was made for me because the teacher who was guiding me through the spiritual exercises cut me off completely once I had the breakdown. It wasn't done unkindly, it was just their policy. You go to a doctor for mental health issues and come back to spiritual practice when you're balanced again. Whereas when I told Bhante about the breakdown, he hardly blinked an eye, just told me to get back on the cushion and watch the emotional storm.

From then on, I never wavered. I realised Buddhism, at least in the form Bhante taught, was what I needed to hold me together in life. In retrospect, I can see that my life became happier from this point onwards. I had been happy as a child and a young adult because things were mostly easy, going my way. But the happiness that started growing now was coming from a deeper place, from the wisdom of the first noble truth, realising that nothing in life was going to satisfy, along with the inspiration of the third noble truth, trusting in the possibility of being free from suffering, content and happy.

One way I first noticed this growing happiness was the transformation I found in my work colleagues. Many whom I had dismissed as foolish or unreliable before I had taken my six months leave, turned out to be wise and trustworthy once I returned. I could genuinely enjoy their company again.

I also began to see an improvement in my relationship with my mother. Having taken a decisive step in my own life, a new level of respect started to grow between us. By the time of her latter years, hatred had transformed to love and we were quite at ease with one another. I moved back to the family home to support her after she turned ninety. Although I'd earlier dreaded the prospect of her becoming dependent on me, caring for her turned out to be as easy as tying my shoelaces. Not blissful, but just ordinary, not a problem.

Considering my earlier dread of her depending on me and the contrasting simplicity of caring for her in her final years gave me vivid proof of the fruits of spiritual practice and brought a lot of happiness. But I've skipped forward twenty years there, so back to my midlife crisis now.

It was around this time that Bhante started teaching ten-day or longer retreats in various locations in Ireland and the UK before moving to Gaia House as spiritual director. I became one of the regular attendees, and it was towards the end of my first two-week retreat that I had an insight which was possibly a revisiting of my childhood insight of God as a real presence separate to me.

While I was walking along the garden path, I became aware of an expansive presence, a still peaceful knowing which filled the sky and pervaded everything around me. In that moment, I knew that all my sensory experience was in total harmony with this presence. Seeing, hearing, moving — these were not disturbing or disturbed by the presence. The only thing that was at odds was my belief in being a separate person, independent. I saw the experience as a demonstration of the truth of *anattā*, and in a flash knew that I would have to lose the identity I called Noirin if I was going to attain Nibbāna.

Although I'd always wanted insight, as soon as it came, I wished it hadn't. It brought up a huge surge of fear — felt like particles of fear were surging up my throat and out of my mouth. While I hadn't felt the presence as threatening in any way, just peaceful, knowing, non-interfering, what frightened me was the knowledge that I'd been making this huge mistake, identifying with the story of my life. Who could I rely on if not myself? And I obviously couldn't rely on myself, because I was the one making the mistake of identifying as me.

This marked another turning point in life, a plunge into fear, but also a waking up. Bhante's support was wonderful. He radiated confidence that I could work with the fear, and I had begun to believe him, even before the retreat was over.

It wasn't easy, though. Since midlife, I'd always had problems sleeping, and now sleep seemed out of the question. Also, the fearful turbulence led to auditory hallucinations, among other things. Every now and then, it seemed as though a hurricane was blowing up, the wind was howling, trees smashing, or else someone would be rubbing a packet of crisps right in my ear, or walking with very heavy footsteps round and round my seat. Fortunately, the visual field wasn't affected, so all I had to do was open my eyes to check that none of this was real, and then go back to working with the anxieties and fear underlying all this strangeness.

What seemed even more fearful was that my face would twitch spontaneously, my tongue waggle around my mouth. The notion that I was not in control of my own body movements seemed to me horrific. The twitching and hallucinations eased off after the retreat was over, though fear and anxiety accompanied me for a long time, along with sleeplessness.

The payoff was increased mindfulness because the fearful thoughts were even more upsetting than the present moment feeling of fear. So for my own peace of mind, I had no choice but to be mindful. "Condemned to the present moment" was how I thought of

myself. In time, I started to see how I was benefiting. Boredom, for example, was a thing of the past, and I had no time for hopelessness or negative thinking. The call to presence was too strong.

In turn, all my relationships grew more trusting and appreciative. This was particularly true within the family. As the bond between myself and my mother strengthened, so also that bond extended to my many cousins, aunts and uncles. Although circumstances prevent me seeing them often, I sense them as a source of friendship, joy and care.

The deepest gift was the steadily growing faith in the Dhamma, especially the truth of *dukkha* and how simply being mindful of *dukkha* led to positive change.

I was very chuffed when in 2003 Bhante asked me to assist him in teaching. I felt this as a great honour and a confirmation that I had turned a corner in life. Trust in the Dhamma was my saviour when in 2005 I was diagnosed with throat cancer, which was treated with radiotherapy, giving me a good seven years until it returned with a vengeance, needing not just major but heroic surgery in 2013, with only a fifty-fifty chance of survival. It also meant losing my voice box. I've written about that in some essays on the website, so I won't say much more here, except that this unwanted turn of events brought deeper faith and insight, along with its natural share of sorrow.

And so let's skip forward to 2020, when after a fall in which she broke her hip, my mother died. A peaceful death, I'm happy to say, and I was with her at the time, which was a gift I will always treasure. By this stage, I was long retired and had always thought of coming to live near Satipanya after my mother's death. She died in January 2020, and in March, I came to Satipanya to join the final month of the winter retreat. But then the COVID lockdown happened and I never went home.

Initially, it was because it was considered unsafe to travel. But as the weeks and months went by, it became clear that there really was no good reason to go back to Dublin and that I would be far happier staying at Satipanya. Luckily, Bhante was also pleased to be able to offload some of the management responsibilities and I was happy to take on more of the teaching. So the COVID lockdown was for me a great blessing, opening up a new phase in life for me, which I trust is very beneficial.

To mark this new phase, I took lay ordination in 2021 to help me take heart in the Dhamma as the inspiration for my life and dedicate the remainder of my time on earth to practice in accordance with the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha. Part of this is an annual retreat, which I take during the winter months. As a treat for my seventieth birthday, I booked a house in Portugal from January last year to the middle of February and spent

my seventieth birthday exploring the joys and woes of the inner life, opening some doors in my mind, making peace with those that remain stubbornly closed. I honestly cannot think of a more satisfying way to mark my seventieth birthday.

A final word about friendship. One wonderful aspect of Dhamma practice is that you meet the best of people — considerate, honest, good-natured, kind, making the best of life's vicissitudes, interested in spiritual matters. It's a heaven realm from that point of view. And I want to thank all of you reading or listening to this for the deep contribution you have made to my life.

I want to finish by thanking Bhante Bodhidhamma for forgiving my many mistakes and encouraging me at every opportunity. Although his equanimity can sometimes be infuriating — "Why can't he just get upset like any normal human being?" I'd be thinking to myself — there is always some small corner of my mind that's willing to trust his good humour as a guide through whatever difficulty is presented. Just as the Rosary guided me in childhood, Bhante's teaching, friendship and unstinting support have guided my latter years, gentling the decline into old age, inspiring faith in what lies beyond.

CHAPTER 2

Vipassanā Instructions

Noirin Sheahan · 46 min

> *This guided meditation session introduces practitioners to vipassanā (insight meditation) according to the Mahasi Method developed by the Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw. The 45-minute practice begins with detailed relaxation and body awareness techniques, followed by systematic instruction in the noting method that forms the heart of this approach.*
>
> *Noirin guides practitioners through the foundational elements of Mahasi vipassanā: establishing comfortable posture, conducting a thorough body scan from head to toes, and developing awareness of the rising and falling movements of the breath within the trunk of the body. The practice emphasizes mental noting—gently labeling experiences as 'rising,' 'falling,' 'touching,' or whatever arises in awareness, whether physical sensations, sounds, emotions, or mental states.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is the instruction on working skillfully with challenges that arise during meditation: wandering mind, sleepiness, physical discomfort, and emotional reactions. The session concludes with profound teaching on how vipassanā practice reveals the Four Noble Truths through direct experience, showing how our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experiences create dukkha (suffering/unsatisfactoriness), and how letting go of these reactions leads to peace. The meditation ends with traditional loving-kindness (mettā) wishes extending from self to all beings.*

Finding yourself some quiet place to sit comfortably for about 45 minutes for this *Vipassanā* meditation practice. And making sure your clothing is loose and comfortable, switching off your mobile phone or anything else you can do to help yourself relax.

The guidance given here is according to the technique developed by the Mahāsi Sayādaw of Burma, known as the Mahāsi Method. We are letting go of all our usual busyness and taking time to relax, sit still and notice what this actually feels like. Sometimes it may feel like a relief and then after a while we might get fed up and want something more active to do. The challenge is to take an interest in both experiences, the sense of relief and the feeling of being fed up. It's the same for whatever comes our way. Deep peace, disturbing noises, happiness, sleepiness, itchy toes, heavenly bliss, cold hands are just plain old matter-of-fact ordinariness. We get to know the moment-to-moment feeling of all of these.

We're spending time getting in touch with the moment to moment feeling of our life, the raw data, so to speak, that comes into our senses each moment. So we get to know ourselves and the world we live in at a deeper, more basic level in this practice. This knowledge is of itself healing. And when we know the world around us and the world within us at the deepest possible level, we will come into total harmony, compassion and peace. For the present though, our job is to stay awake, to relax as best we can, while also maintaining an interest in our various experiences.

See if you can find a way of sitting comfortably, while also having your back straight, as this helps you to be more alert. You might imagine a puppet string attached to the crown of your head, tugging your head and neck gently upwards towards the ceiling. And your chin might drop a little as your neck lengthens. And the upward pull lifts each bone in the spine, so you're sitting upright. And all the rest of the body can relax, as if you are a puppet, just dangling on the end of that puppet string.

Your face can relax. Your eyes can close gently, or if you prefer, keeping the eyes slightly open, but gazing downwards towards the floor. Your shoulders relaxing, and the arms falling from the shoulders, falling down to the hands which are resting comfortably in your lap. Traditionally, the right hand rests in the left. The chest can relax, and the waist, and the stomach, abdomen, pelvis, all softening, relaxing.

You might feel yourself sitting down more heavily into the cushion or chair and your hips loosening a little as all the muscles lose tension, soften and relax. The muscles of the thighs as well, not having to bear your weight now so they can take it easy. And your knees also, as if the upper and lower legs are only loosely bound at the knees. The lower legs can relax as well, falling loosely into the ankles. And the feet as if they were falling out of the ankles. And the toes as if they're just falling out of the feet.

It can also help us relax if we deliberately tense muscles and then relax them slowly. Sounds strange, but it really works. It brings underlying tensions to the surface to where they can be released. But if you have any physical injury or weakness, you might just have to do this very gently. Or maybe just imagine yourself doing it, whatever is right for your body.

We often hold underlying tension in the jaws, the forehead and all around the face and neck. So if you like squeezing all those muscles in the scalp, the forehead, the face, jaws, tongue, lips, throat, neck and holding all that tension for a few moments and then relaxing slowly. And you might even find yourself sighing as underlying tension is released on the out breath. Trying that again, if you like, squeezing all the muscles, holding the tension and releasing slowly, sighing all the tension away.

You could also try that for the shoulders and hands, if you like, pulling the shoulders upwards, squeezing them in, tightening the hands into a fist. You might feel the whole upper body brace somewhat, holding that tension and then slowly releasing. Repeating that if you like, bracing the shoulders, the arms, the hands, holding the tension, holding, and then releasing slowly.

It can also help us relax by taking a deep breath and after a few moments releasing the air suddenly as a big sigh. And if you want to try that now, taking in a deep breath that fills all the chest and pushes the stomach high, holding for a few moments and then releasing completely. And you could try that again the next time the breath comes in, taking it in deeply, holding, holding and then sighing.

So perhaps your body is relaxing now. But if not, that's not a problem. If you're feeling uptight, that's just some underlying emotion surfacing. Can you see this as an opportunity to get to know the experience of feeling uptight? Maybe reminding yourself now and again that it's okay to feel uptight. It's part of every human life. In *Vipassanā*, our job is to get to know every aspect of life, so whatever comes our way is welcome.

Body awareness is a really powerful aspect of Vipassanā, so we'll do a short body scan, letting attention sink into each part of the body, from the crown of the head down to the toes. If you start feeling sleepy during the scan, then sitting upright, imagining that puppet string being pulled upwards towards the ceiling. Or if that doesn't help, opening your eyes for a while. Or standing up, whatever you need to do to remain awake.

Starting at the crown of the head and the whole scalp area. How does that feel now? And letting your attention sink deep within the head and then surfacing towards your face as if you're coming up in your face from underneath the skin. Letting attention dwell in the forehead. Maybe it's frowning in concentration. If so, can it relax?

Attention dwelling in the eyebrows and the eyes and the cheeks and the nose. You might feel how the in breath cools the nostrils slightly. Maybe flares them just a little too. What's the feeling of the out breath in the nostrils? And bringing attention into the upper jaw. And the lower jaw. And that hinge region behind the mouth where the jaws meet. If that area feels tight, then just circling the lower jaw for a few moments might loosen this.

And your lips, you might try curling the corners of the lips upward slightly into a very slight subtle smile. Just seeing if that feels comfortable or pleasant. And inside the mouth, how do the teeth and gums feel? If the upper and lower teeth are locked togeth-

er, see can they open slightly? Can the tongue relax, the tip just resting behind the front teeth? Can you follow sensations back down the tongue, down into the throat? How does the rest of the neck feel?

Sometimes it's all a blank or a blur and sometimes there might be little tingling sensations in places when we bring our attention up close to the body like this. There's no right or wrong way to feel. There's just the truth of your present experience.

Bringing attention into the shoulders. Are they tight? Tense? If so, can they relax a little? Tracing attention down the arms to the elbows. Is there a bony feeling to the elbows? It doesn't matter if you don't have words to describe sensations. Just resting the attention in the body is what's important. And the lower arms, how do they feel? Sometimes we don't feel any sensations in various parts of the body. That's fine too. Just noticing that blank feeling. And the wrists. And the hands. Do your hands feel warm in places, for example? Can you feel your hands touching one another? Or maybe they're touching your lap?

And bringing the attention into the chest, tracing the back down from the shoulders to the waist. Can you feel the ribs rising and falling with each breath? Any feelings from deep inside the chest? Tingly feelings, strange feelings, maybe no feelings? Can you feel the heart beating?

And if your mind wanders, no big deal. That's the nature of the mind, wanting something more interesting than just relaxing within the body. So not giving yourself a hard time about your mind wandering, but encouraging yourself to leave worries and plans and troubles and dreams and whatever aside for this time. And instead to spend a bit of time within yourself, getting to know your body a bit better.

And bringing the attention to the waist area. You might feel the diaphragm, that big muscle underneath the chest as it plunges downwards into the abdomen on the in breath. You might feel how it floats up again as you breathe out. And can you feel how the tummy rises with each in breath? Falls back down again on the out breath. Or deep within the abdomen pelvis. Are there any sensations? Can you feel the internal organs being pushed downwards towards the pelvic floor as you breathe in? And relaxing back again as you breathe out. How does the lower back feel?

And if there is discomfort here or anywhere else in the body, see and can you relax around the discomfort, feeling it just as it is. Bringing attention to the genital area. To the hips left and right. And letting attention drift along the thighs all the way from the hips and right throughout that large muscle mass down to the knees.

How do the lower legs feel? Are there touching sensations in places? Perhaps the legs touching one another or touching clothing. Itching sensations maybe. Noticing how your ankles feel. And your feet. The heels. Through the sole of the foot. The upper part of the foot. And right down to the toes. The big toes, the little toes, and all those toes in between.

And having visited every part of the body, bringing your attention to the wave of breath that swells the trunk of the body as it passes through. And just breathing naturally, not trying to breathe slowly or deeply or any way special. All we're doing is getting to know the physical sensations associated with breathing.

So can you feel the tummy rising and falling as you breathe? Or it might be that you feel the breath in the chest, the rising and falling of the chest every time you breathe. If you can't feel any movements, then you might place a hand on your tummy or your chest and that can focus attention there so you feel the movement more clearly. So just spending a few moments now finding which area of the body is moving most obviously as you breathe.

And once you've settled on an area, best keep your attention there rather than moving it around from place to place. And if you've already trained yourself to concentrate by feeling the breath at the nostrils, that's fine. But for the Mahāsi meditation practice, it is recommended to feel the breath deep within the trunk of the body.

It's also recommended to make a mental note of whatever you're experiencing as this helps to steady the mind and strengthens awareness. So as you feel a rising movement, you could be noting to yourself, rising, rising. And as you feel a falling movement, falling, falling. If you're following the breath of the nostrils, then noting in, in and out, out as you feel the breath coming in and out of the body.

These noting words can be very soft, almost like a footnote, because it's the physical sensation we're interested in. So if the noting word seems really loud in your mind, obscuring the feeling of breathing, then you could deliberately soften that. It's almost like a feather just brushing against the physical feelings of breathing.

If there's a gap between breaths, then you could bring attention to some touch point. For example, the hands touching one another or the buttocks touching the cushion. And noting touching, touching until you next feel a movement due to breathing. So you're just following the physical sensations due to breathing and noting in your mind rising, falling, touching, rising and so on, following the pace of your breath.

If your mind wanders, then as soon as you notice this, you could be curious about the general direction of your thought. For example, planning or dreaming or worrying. And then making a gentle note of this before inviting your attention back to the feeling of breathing. Not giving yourself a hard time for wandering. We're not making an enemy out of the wandering mind, but getting to know it as well. Becoming more aware of the general direction you tend to wander in. That can bring us to a deeper self-awareness.

So perhaps you could cultivate an amused curiosity about the direction of your wandering mind, rather than a sense of exasperation towards it. And having noted planning or worrying or whatever, then bringing your attention back into the body and the feeling of breathing. And sometimes you might not remember what you were thinking about. No need to go racking your brain trying to work out whether it was a plan or a worry or whatever. But just coming back then to the feeling of breathing, rising, falling, touching and so on.

If you're feeling sleepy, then sitting upright, giving a little tug at that puppet string, or opening your eyes, letting in the light, or standing for a while, whatever you need to do to remain awake. But we're not making an enemy out of sleepiness. Our job here is to get to know every human state. So we're interested in the feeling of sleepiness. Does it feel pleasant, for example? Do you like that feeling? How does your body feel? Is it heavy in places? And your mind, how does your mind feel? Does it feel a bit dull? Seeing can you just stay awake and alert enough to get to know the moment to moment feeling of sleepiness.

If your mind is wandering a lot, then it's best to keep returning to the breath and let that rhythmic wave of breathing calm down the busy mind. But if your attention has steadied and you feel interested in your present experience, then letting your attention be drawn to whatever attracts it. Maybe an itching feeling in the body draws attention. If so, letting that come to the forefront and noting itching, itching while you let all those physical sensations be felt. Or maybe some sound takes your attention. So noting hearing, hearing as you listen to the detail of the sound, all its notes and rhythms.

Whatever draws attention, letting yourself zoom into this experience to feel it fully. And if it fades away, if it doesn't take your attention anymore, and if nothing else particularly draws attention, then going back again to the rising falling movements of breathing.

If you notice yourself reacting, for example, disliking the feeling of itching, liking some sounds, disliking others, then noting these reactions, liking, liking or disliking, disliking. You might notice how these reactions can sometimes set up a whole train of

thoughts and internal arguments. Keeping track of these as best you can, noting thinking, thinking or arguing, arguing to deepen the acknowledgement. If you notice yourself feeling calm and peaceful, then noting this calm, calm or peaceful, peaceful for as long as it holds attention.

And if you're getting stiff or in pain, then bringing this centre stage and noting stiff, stiff or pain, pain. Bringing attention right into the heart of the discomfort. Is it aching or burning or pressing? Or maybe there are no words to describe it. Is it all concentrated in a point? Or is it a line of discomfort? Or a general area? How far does it extend? Resting attention there right in the heart of the discomfort.

Also noticing any mental reactions, for example irritation, anxiety, wishing the pain would go away. Again, noting all these, allowing your body and mind to be just as they are. And sometimes the mental reactions are more subtle, harder to notice. So it can help to switch attention from the painful area to a more comfortable area for a while and then back to the painful area again. This can help us feel how the mind reacts to pain. But we're not trying to torture ourselves. So if you feel it's all too much, then moving mindfully to relieve the discomfort. Noticing how your mood might lift as your body gets comfortable again.

Letting whatever calls attention to become center stage in our awareness. And if nothing particularly calls attention, then going back to rising, falling again. If you notice yourself trying hard to meditate to get it right, you can note trying, trying and become curious about the feeling of trying. If it's the opposite and you're feeling lazy, not wanting to bother noticing anything, you could note lazy, lazy and allow that experience to take centre stage for as long as it lasts. Letting yourself feel just exactly as you do feel.

And if whatever you're noting seems to fade away, stops calling attention, and if nothing else takes attention, then you can go back to the rising, falling feelings again. If you find your mind is wandering, then the very moment of waking up and noticing this is a very rich opportunity. How does that wake up feel? Is it a slight startle?

Or maybe a gentle sliding back into awareness? Sometimes we can still feel the emotion that was driving the wandering mind or the startle reaction. If so, see can you allow these feelings to become centre stage for as long as they last, using whatever noting words help acknowledge the experience, like dreaming, dreaming, if you still have the feeling of daydreaming, or worrying, worrying, if you can still sense that feeling of being worried.

And getting to know these feelings in our bodies as well. Worrying can sometimes tense the forehead or the jaws, for example, maybe the chest, the stomach. Or that feeling of dreaming might have an effect, maybe in the chest again, maybe warm, pleasant feelings this time. Just see if you can notice any part of the body that's associated with the underlying emotion. Can you let your attention dwell there to acknowledge the experience more deeply? And then, if the experience fades away, no longer calls attention, and if nothing else particularly calls attention, then going back to the feelings of the breath again. Rising, falling, touching, and so on.

If you're feeling sleepy, then straightening the back, giving a little tug at that puppet string, opening your eyes or standing or whatever you find helps you to stay awake and alert enough to get to know the feeling of sleepiness.

If any emotion arises, see if you can experience this fully. So whether it's a pleasant emotion, like maybe you're feeling happy or calm, just noting these. So happy, happy, calm, calm. Or if it's an unpleasant state, like maybe you're feeling irritable or impatient. Again, can you note this? Irritable, irritable, impatient, impatient.

Being curious about the body as well. Every emotion has some effect on the body. So if there's any part of the body calling attention, just letting your attention rest there. And that'll help you to acknowledge the emotion at a deeper level. And if the emotion fades away and nothing else particularly takes your attention, always going back to the rising falling again.

If your mind is wandering, then being curious about the feeling of waking up and any remaining feeling of the emotion that might have been driving the wandering mind, the feeling of worrying, the feeling of planning, the feeling of dreaming, perhaps just allowing those feelings to be fully felt in mind and body for as long as they last.

If your mind is very restless, hopping from one thought to the next, then noting restless, restless, as you bring attention into the body as well, especially to any areas of tension, relaxing whatever is possible. And perhaps letting the rhythmic wave of breathing provide a calm background to the experience of restlessness.

Allowing yourself to be just as you are, to feel your body and your emotions fully. Not trying to interfere and fix what you don't like, but allowing whatever experience you're going through to be felt just exactly as it is. So if you feel yourself struggling or judging that you're doing something wrong, that you shouldn't be feeling like this, noting these experiences as struggling, judging and so on, bringing attention right into the body, especially into the heart area there at the centre of the chest to feel how the heart is responding to whatever you're going through.

These are actually valuable experiences teaching us about the true nature of human suffering. So see, can you allow yourself to relax and feel them fully? If you can, you may get a glimpse of the four noble truths, the essence of the Buddha's teaching.

If you're struggling against physical pain, for example, wishing it would go away and let you meditate in peace, then this provides an experience of the first truth, that there is *dukkha*, or difficulty, in life. The Buddha's injunction is to fully understand dukkha. And for this reason we allow ourselves to feel the physical pain and any reactions such as the sense of struggling somehow, trying to relax perhaps.

Noticing all this, we sometimes just tire of the struggling, even just for a moment. To our great surprise we find that, although the pain is still there, we feel okay for that moment, relaxed and at peace even in the midst of the pain. We realise that it was the struggling against pain that was causing the misery. In this moment we're experiencing the second noble truth. That dukkha is caused not by the circumstances we find ourselves in, but by our reactions of trying to get rid of what we dislike and to hold on to what we do like.

That feeling of ease we get when we stop struggling is a glimpse of the third noble truth, that dukkha does stop. When we reflect on all this, we realise we found a method to allow dukkha to come to its natural end by letting go of our instinctive reactions of desire to hold on to what we like and to get rid of what we dislike. So we found for ourselves the fourth noble truth, the way to the end of all suffering.

This is the great value of Vipassana. It teaches us to see things just as they really are and thereby to come to the end of the difficulties associated with the human condition.

So let's continue with the practice in silence for a few more moments, letting each experience teach us the way to the end of suffering.

And bringing our meditation practice to a close with a good wish for ourselves and others. May I be safe and well and happy and enjoy a fulfilling, fruitful life. Extending those good wishes to close family and friends. May you be safe and well and happy and enjoy fulfilling and fruitful lives. Extending those good wishes further to our neighbours, colleagues at work, a wider circle of friends. May you be safe, well and happy and enjoy fulfilling and fruitful lives. And finally, extending those good wishes throughout the world to all people on Earth, if you like, including animals, plants, even the physical Earth itself. May all be safe and well and happy and enjoy fulfilling and fruitful lives.

CHAPTER 3

The First Noble Truth - Impermanence and Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · 18 min

> *In this deeply personal talk, Noirin Sheahan unpacks the first noble truth as taught by the Buddha in his initial discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. She clarifies that dukkha is better translated as 'unsatisfactoriness' rather than 'suffering,' explaining the Pāli etymology where 'du' means badly made and 'kha' refers to an axle hole—suggesting life is fundamentally 'a bumpy ride.' The teaching extends beyond obvious difficulties like illness, aging, and death to include even beautiful experiences, since their impermanent nature (anicca) means they cannot provide lasting fulfillment.*
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> *Sheahan shares her own journey of awakening to this truth through her beloved habit of reading, describing how meditation practice gradually revealed she was using books to escape from life rather than engage with it. This honest examination of how endings brought anxiety and sadness opened her eyes to the broader pattern of seeking permanent happiness from inherently impermanent sources—career, relationships, worldly success. Like the Buddha who left his princely life upon recognizing the inevitability of sickness, old age, and death (the three divine messengers or devadūtas), she found herself naturally turning toward the spiritual path as the one area that hadn't disappointed.*
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> *The talk concludes with a hopeful turn toward 'unworldly happiness'—qualities like mettā, generosity, and compassion that can be genuinely relied upon. Through meditation practice, we train ourselves to give attention without expectation of return, fulfilling our deepest need for understanding by immersing ourselves in the actuality of each moment. This generous attending to breath and sensation becomes itself a source of the lasting happiness that worldly pursuits cannot provide.*

This morning I'd like to talk about the Four Noble Truths, which was the way the Buddha explained his understanding the first time he gave a talk after his enlightenment.

The four truths are, first of all, the truth of dukkha—you could say unsatisfactoriness, the unsatisfactory nature of life. The second truth is the cause of this unsatisfactoriness in our lives. The third is the cessation—the good news, the fact that this unhappiness, this sense that life doesn't satisfy our needs, can all cease. And the fourth truth is the path leading to that cessation.

The first truth, dukkha, is often called the truth of suffering. But suffering is really too strong a word because it sounds very extreme. In the Buddha's understanding, even minor little irritations that we would think we could cope with would be included in dukkha. And even happy states would be included. The reason for that is because the happiness doesn't last forever. He would consider them unsatisfactory as well because they don't last forever. So a better translation for dukkha is unsatisfactoriness.

Joseph Goldstein traced out the Pali for the word and found that *du* means bad or badly made, and *kha* is the hole into which an axle fits in a wheel. If you can think of that—a badly made axle hole—it ends up in a very bumpy ride. So life is a bumpy ride, basically, is what this first noble truth is saying.

Each of the four truths comes with some injunction, some instruction for us. And the first one is to really understand the truth of dukkha. We're asked to look at our life and see what is unsatisfactory. Is life unsatisfying for us? There are obvious areas of difficulty like pain, illness, loss of those we love, various disappointments, aging, death. There are many aspects of life which are very obviously unsatisfying for us.

But then there are other aspects to life—there's sunshine, there's birdsong, there's friendship, there's art. There are very beautiful aspects to life. In what sense can these also be called unsatisfying? They do make us happy. Lovely sunshine and birdsong definitely cheer us up, give us a great lift. But the question is, can they make us happy forever? Can we base our life on them? Can we stake our life on them?

Even, for example, if you're in a very loving relationship—a really loving relationship where you feel yourself completely cherished. Somebody recognizes you for who you are and really feels genuine warmth and love for you. That's a very beautiful relationship for any of us to experience. But the awful possibility is that ten years later, the other person can just tire of you and go off with somebody else. That happens all the time, unfortunately.

Where does that leave us? Probably incredibly hurt and angry and let down and shocked and bewildered, life in disarray, really not knowing where to start again or what to do with ourselves. Maybe a lot of shame as well, a sense of failure, bewilderment—how could this happen? It can lead to huge upset when whatever we based our happiness on suddenly disappears for one reason or another.

That's the sense in which even the most beautiful aspects of life can't be totally relied upon—they fade away. If the other person doesn't go away out of unfaithfulness, eventually they might get sick and die. So again, we're left without that person cherishing us, looking after us, helping us feel worthwhile. The whole bereavement process brings us to the same sort of place.

If we base our life on any of the worldly happinesses—a loving marriage, success in our career, a skill we have—all of these do fall apart, will fall apart, either before our old age and death or at that time. Everything falls apart in this life, and that's the truth of this aspect of dukkha, *anicca dukkha*, anicca meaning transience. Because things are changing, they can't be relied upon for happiness.

The Buddha himself came to realize this in what was for him his late 20s—what would have been thought of as midlife in those days. He had had a very privileged upbringing. He was a prince, very respected, very skilled and talented, very beloved. He had been protected from the truths of life. And he became very painfully and suddenly aware of the fact that people get sick. He recognized that it could happen to him. Other people get sick; it could happen to me. He realized that people age, and just as other people age, he was going to age. And people die, and just like everyone else was going to die, he was also going to die.

In a kind of shocked bewilderment, realizing that all his happiness, all his pleasure, all his skill, his place in society—it was all going to disintegrate with the inevitable coming of sickness, old age, and death—he could no longer invest in his position, could no longer take any interest in it or take any happiness out of it. In those terms, life just wasn't worth living.

The angst and anxiety posed by that caused him to leave his palaces—an incredibly courageous decision—and join the wandering ascetics of those days, people who would really wander with no money, no home, just living a homeless life, wandering through the woods, through the countryside, living off alms, and searching for truth. There was a real spiritual quest going on in those days, and he joined the spiritual seekers.

And luckily for us, he found a way to the end of suffering.

Now, it takes an awful lot of courage for us to truly see those three. They're called devadutas—sickness, old age, and death—the messengers of the gods, the reality of this life. But it takes so much courage for us to actually see that this is coming our way. We shun it in all kinds of ways. We shun that truth and avoid it.

But we can learn this truth of anicca, of transience, in less threatening ways, I think. And certainly that's the way I've been gradually, gradually taking it all in.

My first taste of it—that happiness can't be relied upon forever—came through the whole experience of what for me was a great happiness: the pleasure of reading. I always loved books. I was an avid reader as a child, always in bookshops, always getting new books. If I had to wait anywhere, it was no problem so long as I had a book. If I had to meet someone and they were an hour late, it didn't matter so long as I had a book. I almost had my own escape from dukkha—nothing mattered so long as I had a book to read. I could be happy. It was a genuine pleasure for me and really protected me from an awful lot of unhappiness in life.

But then, as I started meditation, it just all began to fall apart. And really it fell apart with the insight that I was escaping from life, that this was an escape. This happiness was not genuine. It was an attempt to escape the realities of life.

How it actually materialised was that I became better able to acknowledge the emotions around the ending of each book. I remember one particular book where I was so sad when it ended that I kept making up stories about the characters. It was as if I was trying to compose the next book. I couldn't let those characters go.

Then I remember another book after that where I was turning the pages somewhere around the middle and I just became horribly aware that the pages on one side were fewer than the pages on the other. The whole truth of transience was manifesting, you could say, in the turn of every page. Each page turn was a torture because it was bringing me closer and closer to the end. A real anxiety emerged with that particular book.

And when that book did come to an end, I just had to come to the dread realisation that yes, this attempt of mine to bury myself in the written word was just screening out life. I was not facing up to the reality of life. So it wasn't an escape from dukkha in any genuine sense. It was an escape from life.

It also made me very ashamed. I realised I was ashamed at having taken what I could see as a cowardly way out, not really facing life, just escaping from it. There was a lot of shame involved there.

In retrospect, it's very strange that I'd never noticed that before. I had been reading for probably forty years at that stage, and I had really never noticed the sadness around endings. It is amazing how we can gloss over this at all kinds of endings. Even when we're saying goodbye to someone, we're nearly always saying, "Well, I'll see you," and we're working out when we'll see them again. We're not acknowledging the fact that this is a parting.

We escape from endings usually by thinking of the next new beginning. In my case, it might be that I would immediately think of a new book, or phone a friend, or do something. We shield ourselves from the truth of dukkha. And one very strong way we do it is to brush over endings, to really pretend they're not happening.

So how can it help us to look at life in this honest way? Well, like the Buddha—but maybe not quite so dramatically—it forced me to look deeper into my life. What I found was that so much had lost its fascination for me. Career, for example, even relationships. I realised that none of them had lived up to whatever expectations I'd had, that I was living under false expectations.

But when I looked at it, the only thing that hadn't disappointed me in this way was meditation practice. I could see that this was the one area I had cultivated in life which still held a promise of a genuine, deep possibility of happiness.

Now, I didn't, like the Buddha, cut off my hair and go wandering in a homeless way. But I did take a three-day week and step down from a lot of responsibilities, and I took a conscious decision to give up on the endless search for a happy relationship and put all my effort into the spiritual life. It was a great relief to take that decision. It really was a relief to be able to genuinely say for myself: so much hasn't worked out.

It sounds very sad, but in actual fact it was a relief. And when I look back on it, it was a real turning point in life for me. Things started getting better from there. So that genuine look at life, caused by opening to this truth of anicca and dukkha, really did start making my life more genuinely happy.

I began then with the spiritual journey and meditation practice to see more deeply into this truth of anicca, in the way I've been describing. At the start of things, there's great hope and promise. For me, the start is very uplifting, very invigorating. There's a lot of gladness and energy for me around the start of things. But what does the ending mean? This is always just a question for me. And the ending—the footsteps, symbolically—it's like an absence. It leaves me bewildered, wondering what was all that about?

So basically I saw that I was expecting the world to deliver happiness to me. Whatever way I had interpreted the cultural messages we receive, I was doing my share. I was putting a lot of energy into life, putting all my resources into things and giving to life in that sense. But there was the expectation that life should then deliver happiness. And just the realisation that life wasn't doing its share of the bargain—I was doing mine, but it wasn't doing its. So anyway, it just showed me the false promise we have in our culture: if I work hard, I'll be happy. It's one that went very, very deep into me.

So really this truth of anicca, transience, is telling us that because everything is slipping away and changing, nothing in this world can actually deliver permanent happiness. It's beyond its capability. Career, relationships, everything—they're all changing and slipping away so that we can't rely on them.

But as we were talking about the other day, there is also unworldly happiness. Mettā, for example—genuine friendship, wishing each other well, care for one another, compassion. These are sources of genuine happiness for us. On this we can rely and we can actually build. This is a genuine source of happiness for us. We can develop all of these qualities.

And we do it here by attending to each moment without an expectation of return. We're giving our attention to the breath, the footstep, without any agenda. It's a giving without an expectation. We're training ourselves to give just really for the sake of giving, which is generosity—and which is one of the unworldly happinesses we can rely on.

And what we're giving is attention, which is a lot. Attention is huge. We all crave attention. We crave attention from one another. And most deeply, I think we crave it from ourselves. So here we're learning to give attention generously. We are giving to ourselves in a very deep way here.

Our deepest need is for understanding of the world. And that understanding is born of immersing ourselves in the actuality of life, moment after moment, letting the truth seep into us. We are giving to ourselves in a very profound way.

This is our escape, really, from the fact that the world doesn't deliver to us—to give to what we know of the world: sensations, feelings, our full attention to them. And in that giving, coming to what we really need to understand: the truth of life.

CHAPTER 4

The First Noble Truth - Not-Self and Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · 23 min

> *In this insightful talk, Nóirín Sheahan continues her exploration of the First Noble Truth by examining anattā dukkha—the suffering that arises from our deeply held belief in a separate, permanent self. She distinguishes three types of dukkha: dukkha dukkha (obvious suffering like pain and loss), aniccā dukkha (dissatisfaction arising from impermanence), and anattā dukkha (the stress of trying to control experience through an illusory separate self).*
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> *Through a beautiful personal example of listening to birdsong, Sheahan illustrates how direct experience reveals our profound interdependence with the world around us. She explains that the sense of self is not wrong or bad—it serves evolutionary purposes and helps us navigate daily life—but it is constructed, temporary, and arises in response to desire. The peaceful state of not-self (anattā) is actually more common than we realize, occurring whenever desire subsides, though we rarely notice it because it demands no attention.*
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> *Sheahan addresses common misunderstandings, emphasizing that the Buddha never condemned having a healthy sense of self. Rather, he taught that we need a confident, well-developed self to walk the gradual path toward liberation. The practice involves learning when to create a sense of self for wise purposes and when to let go, surrendering to the truth that we cannot ultimately control our experience. Through accepting what comes our way and embracing our fundamental interconnectedness, we discover a peace far deeper than any separate self could achieve.*

I want to continue saying something about the first noble truth, the truth of dukkha.

There is what's described as dukkha dukkha—the real suffering that we'd all agree is suffering: pain, illness, disability, death, loss of loved ones. Things that genuinely we all sympathize with each other for. Then there was what I was talking about this morning, anicca dukkha, the suffering and dissatisfaction associated with the fact that things change, that we can't hold on forever to our happiness. And very much related to it is what I want to talk about tonight: anatta dukkha.

Anatta is usually translated as "not-self." Now, it's a very confusing area of Buddhist thought. So if you get confused tonight, just know you're in good company. It's easy to get confused.

It's confusing in the sense that it's obvious to us that I am me and you're you and everybody is themselves. So what on earth do we mean by not-self? We see ourselves as separate parcels of existence. And the Buddha would agree that for practical purposes, yes, this is true. But it's not true all the time—there are times when our sense of self can just drop away. The normal view is true too. We can operate in the world as a self. We can decide to do certain things. But at another level, an ultimate level, we can let our sense of self drop away and experience a peace—the peace of anatta, the peace of not-self.

The truth of anatta is really saying that we don't have a totally separate identity, that we are interdependent, very intimately interdependent.

My first experience or inkling of this was one time I was hearing a birdsong. I was really liking the birdsong, and then when the bird stopped, I noticed I got anxious. The bird would start again and I'd be delighted. Stop, I'd get anxious, and so on. It came to me through that direct contact with the sound: is that sound inside me or outside of me? I couldn't really tell. I knew at the conceptual level that the bird was outside. But at another level, my ears were hearing the sound directly. My brain was processing it. All the neurons and hormones required to make me feel anxious or happy were happening within me as a result of that sound. There was this direct interconnection between the bird and me—the bird was pushing all my buttons at that time. The bird was more in control of me than I was. He could decide whether to stop or start singing, and then I'd have to go anxious or happy.

That's just an example of that truth of interdependence, anatta—that we're not separate. At that moment, because I was just directly hearing, I had no real sense of a boundary between myself and the bird. I wasn't thinking "me, bird"—I was just hearing and feeling the response.

For me, that was a level of insight into this truth of anatta. It was scary in some sense, because I realized how incredibly vulnerable we are, how open we are. Our emotional openness to each other is very deep. But it also struck me as very beautiful—that for at least that moment, I could see that I wasn't actually separate from the rest of the universe, not in an essential way, a permanent way.

At some level, we know this because we know that our feelings and emotions are all triggered by each other. People can push our buttons and we get annoyed or whatever. So we know we're not separate in that sense, that we directly affect each other. But I think we can experience it at a deeper level if we really pay attention. Feeling that direct contact with the world, direct contact with our emotions—that sense of a separate boundary of me and the world just starts to get fuzzy, very fuzzy and unclear.

In reality, we're very deeply interdependent. We're actually kind of co-creating each other. Even what's happening here now—I'm speaking and you're hearing, and by you listening, I'm having to process ideas. So we're all changing at the moment, very deeply. We're co-creating each other and our own reality.

I think it's an idea worth dwelling on, that level of interdependence. But as opposed to that, there's also a strong sense of identity—me, mine, my biscuit. There is a sense of a big boundary around me. The Buddha would say this is really a belief—the belief that I am a separate parcel of existence. It's a very strong belief. But it can come and go.

This sense of self is created in order to fulfill a desire. It's probably evolutionary in nature—we have to fight or fly from a tiger in order to survive as an animal in this world. A sense of self that says "I'm important, my life is important, I have to get away from this threat" is really important for survival. Similarly, "I have to eat all this lovely food because I'm important." So that sense of self that gets created is very possibly evolutionary, and it helps us enormously in life.

It's not to think of the sense of self as wrong—it's just that it's not ultimate. It's not the absolute truth. It's not the forever-and-ever truth that we have to experience all the time. It's basically a construction in the mind that happens once we feel a desire. If we're walking along the street and we pass by a café and we get the aroma of coffee, and we look in the window and see luscious cream cakes, then suddenly the desire arises for coffee and cake. We immediately turn and go in and get the coffee and cake. The sense of self was just constructed there in order to fulfill that desire.

Now, I think it's interesting that one teacher says—and I unfortunately can't remember the name—that the mind state of not-self is actually much more common, but it's just so unobtrusive that we don't notice it. It's happening most of the time, all our lives, but we just don't notice it. When an idea isn't in our mind, we don't think about it. The usual example given is this: if I tell you "don't think about a pink elephant," most people immediately start thinking about a pink elephant. It's the same way if I say "don't think about yourself, just drop that idea"—you immediately start thinking about yourself. "Of course I'm me." We can't stop thinking about an idea through willpower. The idea stimulates the idea.

So it is with the sense of self. When the idea of self is there, it's strong, it's very persuasive. It really tells us that we are an important person who needs this, that, and the other thing. And when it just falls away—as it does when there's no desire happening, just peaceful moments in life—it's such a simple, unobtrusive, not-demanding-at-

tention type of mind state that we just don't notice it. In that sense, we often don't consciously experience the truth of anattā, but in actual fact it's there in the background of our lives all the time.

Now, one mistake we can make around all this is to think we're bad for having a sense of self. We hear the teaching that not-self is a deep truth, a very peaceful truth, and we want to be in that state all of the time. But that's an impossibility. This is a gradual path. The Buddha often described his path to full enlightenment as a very gradual one—he likened it to the continental shelf, just gradually sloping into the ocean, gradually getting deeper and deeper. The sense of self is an important part of getting us to the deeper truth of not-self. We need to have a strong, well-developed, confident, good, healthy sense of ourselves in order to tread the path.

So to be thinking of ourselves as wrong is not the idea the Buddha was trying to get across. In fact, he would say the opposite. He would often say, "Cherish yourselves. Do what's best for your own happiness, which is to tread this path. Strive diligently for your liberation." He would tell us to really look after ourselves in order to find the deeper happiness where the truth of anattā resides.

Remember, the self is created—a construction in the mind, an idea you could say, that comes and goes—in order to fulfill a desire. There can be really wise desires: the desire to meditate, the desire to come on retreat, the desire to help others, to care for others, to give service and work. These are all very wise desires, and it's good to create a good sense of self in order to do them—to help our friends, to be a good friend. These are wise desires that help the world move in the right direction.

So we certainly do need to look after ourselves, to do our best to have a good, confident sense of self, to love ourselves, to care for ourselves, and not to run ourselves down. The Buddha never said that the sense of self was wrong. He would have said the opposite: care for yourself. All he said was that it's temporary. It's insubstantial. It's a state of mind that comes and goes. It comes up when we have a desire. Once that desire has been fulfilled, it will actually drop away again—but we just don't notice it, because it's so unobtrusive.

So basically then, our work really is to decide when to create a sense of self—which desires to fulfil, which ones to really get ourselves together and attack with gusto, saying "Yes, I will do this." And then which desires can we let go of in order to move towards that deep peace of not-self, of not having to react to every single whim.

Now, although it's hard to experience the sense of not-self—though we might on occasion—it is possible to tune into the experience of a self being created. That's easier, and it's just very interesting to see it happening. I think you probably will start seeing it if you just tune in.

Say in life, for example, if somebody gives you a compliment, you might immediately feel yourself growing taller. Gregory Kramer calls it "puffing up." The whole sense of self is fed, is nourished by getting a compliment. So we feel bigger, we feel stronger, we feel more confident. We feel important, and so on. It's a good feeling. A very happy sense of self is created for a few moments at least when we get a compliment. So just tuning into that, just noticing the sense of me, an important person, just coming up—and that's all, not criticising, just the wonder of it. How the whole being can be stimulated by various things.

Of course the opposite can happen. We can create a very unhappy sense of self if we get criticised or ignored or something like that. And again, it's interesting to tune into what happens there. Often I experience it as some sort of collapse. Even physically, the head might go down, the shoulders might droop, and a sense of dullness maybe comes into the mind. A sense of "I'm no good"—though it could be anger, of course, and anger will probably create that important sense of self. But if it's not anger, if it's that "I'm no good" type of feeling, then that often feels like a collapse, some sort of dulling down.

So it's just to tune into the process of what many teachers call "selfing"—a verb, the self getting created, a mental process happening moment after moment. We can tune into it.

Now it is harder to tune into the dropping away of self. In the same way as, if you have a toothache, while it's there it's the centre of your experience, the centre of existence. It's so important and terrible. But hours later you might notice, "Oh, it's gone." Or days later. But do you ever notice the last moment of a toothache? Very few people do. I don't know if I ever have. I have noticed the last moment of shorter-term things like cramp, if you can tune into them. And it is very interesting just to follow them to the end, and how the mind just loses interest really towards the end when the pain is going away.

So in that sense, it's harder to notice the dropping away of self. We just don't notice the absence of problems, usually, because when the self is there it's often big and strong and creating some sort of trouble because it wants to get its desires met. The sense of self can often be problematic for us. But when it all dies away, it's like a toothache or a cramp dying away—just not terribly interesting for us. It doesn't call attention.

But in meditation, we can sometimes dip into experiences where we are in direct contact with reality. We're simply hearing, or feeling our bodies, sensations, our moods—feeling all that without the added layer of concept and thought. At those times, we actually are in the experience of anattā, the experience of not-self. Usually it's just that we're not reflecting at that time, so we don't take it in consciously in a way we can then talk about to ourselves afterwards. We're just in that lovely direct experience. But if you do have any of those moments, it's worth reflecting on them afterwards, just seeing: was there much of a sense of self there? This allows the teaching to seep in a bit deeper—that it is possible for the sense of self to fall away, that it's happening all the time and causing us no problem at all.

And yet we feel so threatened. The idea of anattā is often very frightening—the sense that I don't have any permanent existence. It can scare us to think about it. But I think it's consoling to be told that it's happening all the time, and we're just not noticing because it's such a happy, pleasant state. So we can cope with the truth of anattā. We can. Our being is coping with it all the time.

The self often means trouble, in the sense that it comes up to fulfil a desire, and very often most of our desires are simply reactivity—reactions to the cold, for example. We could have been in that very peaceful state of direct experience in walking meditation, and then suddenly we start to feel a bit cold, and very quickly there's crossness. "Where's the hat and gloves?" And all the self-consciousness about leaving the walking meditation, wondering if others will judge us, and they're getting in the way. An awful lot of trouble arises with the self, very often. So you can usually tell when the self has arisen by just noting the trouble in life. It brings a lot of trouble.

My agenda, my needs, and so on. The sense of self is associated with the stress of reactivity. This is really what we mean by *anattā dukkha*—the suffering associated with a self that's trying to control experience, control life, control others in order to be happy. It's just trying to find happiness, trying to find pleasure, which is very laudable. This whole path that we're on is happiness-seeking.

But the only trouble with the self trying to find happiness is that it's out of touch with ultimate reality, because the self isn't permanent and basically can't keep manipulating things to keep happiness for itself. So it's onto a losing battle immediately. It's often associated with deep distress, trying to over-control things.

We would understand this in terms of over-identification. Over-identification with our job, where we just get really fussy—things have to be done this way and this way only. We get perfectionistic, we won't trust others to help in the work, we work late, we

work long, we think ours is the best way and the only way. Then if anyone criticises, of course, it's devastating, and basically the job becomes a torment, usually for us as well as for others. The over-identification problem.

There's a lot of distress in any area of life where we over-identify. If we're trying to control family members so that they're the way we think they ought to be, there's an awful lot of unhappiness associated with that. We can over-identify with anything—a hobby. We can over-identify with our spiritual practice and just be stressing ourselves out, trying to get to the state of not-self. We can do all kinds of things to ourselves.

So it's a tricky area, one to just keep examining—the distress of this illusion of self that thinks it should be in control. And then there's an awful lot of self-blame. When things go wrong, it must be my fault, because that idea that I can control life means that if things go against me, it was my fault, I didn't control it right. So a huge amount of self-blame gets embedded in there, very, very distressing. Over-identification would be one way of seeing this *anattā dukkha*.

But we can find the way out, which we're doing here now. It's surrendering to the truth that we're actually not in control, not ultimately. We have a certain level of control—we can decide to meditate—but we can't control our mind state. We can't make sure that we're concentrated, or that we're alert, or that we have happy experiences. We have only a very limited level of control over our experience.

So it's surrendering to that truth, and knowing that the rotten stuff can happen to anyone, anywhere. And if it happens to me, it's not my fault. It's just circumstances coming together so that I'm going through a patch that maybe feels very bad. But the rotten stuff can be embraced willingly, as we reflect on the truth that there's just no way out of it. We can't always control and keep away what we don't like.

Therefore, the only way to be at peace with the world is to embrace what comes our way as willingly as we possibly can, and just trust that this will get deeper and deeper as we immerse ourselves more fully in truth. It's exactly the practice here—taking an interest in what comes our way, accepting it, and yes, eventually coming to a deeper peace than we could possibly have as a separate self.

CHAPTER 5

The Second Noble Truth - The Cause of Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · 24 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Noirin Sheahan offers a compassionate and practical exploration of the Second Noble Truth—the origin of suffering through craving (taṇhā). She carefully examines the Buddha's teaching on the three types of craving: craving for sensual pleasures (kāma-taṇhā), craving for being or existence (bhava-taṇhā), and craving for non-being (vibhava-taṇhā). Rather than presenting desire as something to be harshly judged or suppressed, she frames these cravings as natural survival strategies built into our human condition, deserving of compassionate understanding.*
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> *The talk offers rich practical guidance for working with desire in meditation and daily life. Sheahan explains the middle way between suppression and indulgence—acknowledging desires, feeling them in the body, but not acting on them, allowing them to naturally burn out. She draws on Joseph Goldstein's humbling encounter with his teacher Sayadaw U Paṇḍita to illustrate how the mind embellishes and how we can meet our imperfections with humor and self-compassion. Referencing Thanissaro Bhikkhu's teaching on selves and not-self, she describes our inner life as a 'committee at loggerheads'—multiple conflicting desires each generating temporary selves.*
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> *Particularly valuable is her explanation of how desire arises from vedanā (feeling tone) and how staying present with pleasant or unpleasant sensations—without letting craving proliferate—leads to peace. The talk concludes with an inspiring passage from the Saṃyutta Nikāya where Ānanda explains to a Brahmin how desire itself can be used skillfully to reach the end of desire, offering practitioners encouragement that this is indeed a workable, gradual path.*

I'd like to say a few words about the second noble truth now, which is the truth of the cause of suffering.

In the Buddha's words: "What is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is craving which renews being and is accompanied by relish and lust, relishing this and that. In other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being. But whereon does this craving arise and flourish? Wherever there is that which seems lovable and gratifying, thereon it arises and flourishes. There is this noble truth of the

origin of suffering. Such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light that arose in me about things not heard before. And this noble truth must be penetrated by abandoning the origin of suffering."

So we have three sources of suffering that the Buddha describes here. The first is sense pleasures—all the lovely sights and sounds, here in the countryside, good food. Remember that sense pleasures also include all the pleasures of the mind: good conversations, good discussions, a detective story if you like detective stories, any sort of happy thoughts. And of course, the opposite is implied. If we like the pleasant, we also want to get rid of the unpleasant—pain, irritating noises, unpleasant tastes and smells. And of course, all the unhappiness of the mind: depression, fear, unhappy thoughts of all descriptions. Craving is the word used in that particular sutta; it's often called desire, or sometimes lust. Craving, desire, lust—that wanting. You could describe it as wanting what's lovely, not wanting what's horrible.

There's also this secondary craving: the craving to be. That's a craving to be somebody. We want to be recognized. We want to be valued. We want to be respected. All of these make us feel good; they really give us a boost in our life. We can experience this around family, for example, if we're identified with our family. The role of parent can give a lot of joy and pride and happiness. It can make the hard work involved in being a parent worthwhile. It can make sense of life. There's a role in life, a meaning to my life: I am a father or a mother. This can provide great joy in life, and these are real joys. The Buddha doesn't in any way say don't enjoy life. There's a list of the various happinesses, and one of them would be looking after family and friends, cherishing children.

Another area where we identify would be our jobs. There again, we can really crave that sense of recognition around being somebody with a skill, somebody with a trade, somebody who belongs to some organization, somebody with expertise. The craving to be an expert, to be a really good carpenter, plumber, whatever it is—our hobbies as well, if we want to be the best gardener, the best bridge player. This is all the area of craving to be, and it would include friendships, too. To be a friend, to have friends gives us a lot of comfort. It helps our sense of self-worth.

Again, this can be used very skillfully along the spiritual path. But it's important to see where we are also allowing it to draw us into suffering—that real neediness for our friends to always be available, for example, or a terrible anxiety about our friends because we can't live without them. All these desires can be used skillfully to support us along the path.

There's another huge desire, of course: the desire to be enlightened. That can really get in our way. Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist master, would call that spiritual materialism—getting our status out of spiritual matters instead of houses and homes and material things, but getting our sense of self-worth from spiritual progress. That can be an area which causes huge suffering as well, so it's just to be aware of it. These are all the craving to be, and you can probably think of many more examples.

And then there's the craving not to be. That includes all the areas we don't want to be identified with—failure, for example. Most of us would dread the thought of being seen as a failure, so we tend to hide our mistakes, gloss over our mistakes, even pretend to ourselves that we didn't make them somehow or other.

Joseph Goldstein has a nice story around that. In one of his interviews with his teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, without really having made a decision to do so, he found himself reporting his practice as a tiny bit better than it was. He realized afterward that he was doing this. He had a sense of what he should be seeing at this stage of his meditation practice after so many years, how equanimous he should be, how many insights he should have. That was coloring the way he was reporting everything. Just at the end of the interview, U Pandita said, "That's not true."

At the end of a long, flowing interview filled with reports of spiritual success, Upandita simply said, "That's not true."

Joseph Goldstein said he wanted the floor to open up and swallow him. He was so embarrassed—it was terrible. He spent days struggling with embarrassment and self-judgment of all descriptions. And he realized, as soon as it was said, that he had been exaggerating.

At the end of about two days of pure agony, he was able to simply see: the mind does this as well. That's another aspect of the human mind. We want to be a success, and that's what the mind does—it pretends that it's a little bit better than it is. So he was able to see himself more humorously from then on. In that sense, it was a very good lesson for him. He never took himself quite so seriously after that, because the human mind plays all kinds of tricks. It really is very devious.

We don't want to be a failure. There's also the whole area of employment. Often our first question when meeting someone is, "What do you do?" To have to say, "Well, I'm unemployed"—that's a bit of a comedown. In certain social circles, to be a janitor is a comedown. We just don't want to have to say any of that. The whole area of employment can become a source of real embarrassment, and that can become a big source of stress for us, not wanting to be seen in certain social lights.

There is really so much stress built into the human condition—wanting to be a success, not wanting to be a failure, wanting to be accepted. And we must be careful not to blame ourselves for all of this. We can hear the Second Noble Truth—desire is the cause of suffering—and then start blaming ourselves for having all these desires. It's a very easy mistake to make, and it's a mistake I find myself in again and again.

I find it helpful instead to reflect on the whole condition and to generate some compassion around it. All of these desires are part of our survival strategy. This probably comes from our evolution, just as we were mentioning before: in order to survive, we need to thrive. We need the good stuff in life. We thrive on things like good food, good education, a safe space as a home—maybe with a nice garden in the countryside. All those pleasant sounds, pleasant sights, a sense of good social status, the safety—all of that would allow us to thrive.

Naturally our self wants to thrive. These desires are built into our system. It's not that they're our fault, or that we're wrong for having desires. They are essentially survival strategies, and in that sense, they are wise. All of those desires that promote health and well-being, a sense of confidence, a sense of self-worth—these are certainly not to be despised.

So we generate compassion around that whole area of desire, reflecting that desires are natural. Many of them can be used for good, as we were mentioning before. It's a question of deciding which ones to follow and which ones not to follow.

There is this teaching that desire causes dukkha. There may be the tendency then to judge desire as wrong and to suppress it. But that is just another desire—the desire for enlightenment, the suppression of desire in order to get to the end of suffering. That's a vicious circle. It can't work. It's an easy mistake, but we just have to see it again and again and keep dropping it.

What can we do? The Buddha says this noble truth must be penetrated by abandoning the origin of suffering. We have to abandon—or as we often say, let go of—desire. We can acknowledge the desire. Especially here in meditation, we don't have to fulfill our desires, but we can really acknowledge them, feel them if possible. That way we're not suppressing; we're allowing the desire to express itself in our minds and our bodies, but we're not indulging it. This is the middle way between suppression and indulgence.

If we feel the desire to rush—the Mahasi technique asks us to do everything slowly, and we just really feel the desire to rush through that door—can we feel that desire and feel the way it propels our body forward, and instead just see: can we relax, take it easy,

open the door slowly? That's allowing the desire, the impatience for getting here, there, and everywhere, to burn out. We have the desire to gobble our dinner, to just get through it quickly.

And again, if we can just feel that desire, acknowledge it, not make ourselves wrong for it, but simply acknowledge it and let it be felt in the body. Perhaps the shoulders wanting to move, the hands wanting to reach for the next spoonful, the jaws wanting to chew quickly. Notice all of the tension associated with that desire, and yet slowing down, relaxing as best we can, not following the desire. This is just letting the desire burn itself out. That's our middle path, our work here.

We can also simply listen to our thoughts. "I want another biscuit." It's so easy to come in and dismiss that, "That's a stupid thought," and put it away. But if we listen to it—okay, I do want another biscuit—and allow it to be felt, really listen to it, that's a kinder way of being with desire. We listen to those thoughts and realize that's what's happening. There is a desire. You might even feel somewhere in the body a kind of grasping around that thought of another biscuit. "I want to go to bed." Again, just listening to that, really listening into it, feeling the wish to go to bed with interest in the feeling itself. We're taking the interest off going to bed, that dream of how lovely bed will be, and instead placing interest in the here and now, the feeling of wanting to go to bed. Listening attentively to our own desires rather than quickly answering them with a put-down of some form. Allowing ourselves to be human, to have all these desires.

Of course, then there is the whole area of suppression of desire. We can't just stop that either. We can't just turn off the suppressive forces within us. They're probably very deep habits. So again, it's a question of listening to those as best we can. And that can be hard—well, I find it anyway quite hard.

The suppressive forces would often involve a very stern crossness somewhere. So just tuning into where in my body is stern or cross. For me, I find it in the forehead. And sometimes around the back of the neck, the jaws. All of that is trying to almost clamp down on these desires for more biscuits or wanting to go to bed. We tune in to the suppressive forces as well, and again, listen to them. The quick giving out, the quick answer back to any desire like "I want a biscuit"—and something says, "No, you don't. You've had enough." Just noticing those quick reactionary thoughts and perhaps feeling into them. That's listening and acknowledging the control freak in us, which is a strong force within us.

Linked to that, there can be a lot of shame. Shame at our own imperfections, hating imperfections. Again, it will be linked to fear of failure, fear of judgment. These go deep within us and they need tender acknowledgement, a lot of compassion, a lot of sympathy. It's a long and patient process, really, being with this human condition that has so many desires built into it.

It's very interesting that there are so many different desires, and they're often in conflict with one another. The desire for the biscuit and then immediately, "No, you don't want a biscuit." Other desires too—we want to be liked by everybody, but we also want to have our own way.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a wonderful series on selves and not-self. As we were saying last night, each desire has the effect that our whole being goes into this idea of self. An idea of self is born in order to fulfill the desire. So every desire brings up some aspect of ourselves, some aspect of our personality. It can be the whiny child who wants another biscuit, or it can be the stern schoolteacher saying, "No, you've had enough."

He likens our condition to being like a committee. We're not a person. We're a committee. And we're a committee at loggerheads with one another, one member shouting at the other. Often a lot is going on under the surface. We're not very honest because we actually don't know ourselves that well. There's an awful lot of subconscious activity going on. It's not even a committee, he says—it's more like a corrupt town council, where people are taking bribes from each other and stabbing each other in the back.

We really have a bit of a job with all these conflicting desires, and somehow trying to survive in the midst of all this is no joke.

Now, one other possibility we have here is to see the detail of the arising of desire. Desire is born from either pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

And the feeling, if you remember, is just the recognition of some sense impression as being pleasant or unpleasant. So we smell the food, for example, at dinner. That's a pleasant aroma, and it would lead to the desire: "Okay, I want to get stuck into this now." And then the self is created in order to pick up the spoon and shove it into our mouth and get going on eating.

If we can notice all of that—the aroma, and then the sudden way the system is ready to eat, the tension in the muscles ready to pick up knives and forks—if we can see that and just stop, just let it go, don't act on the desire, and let it all die away, what we'll have at some stage, a little bit later when the system has relaxed, will be again simply the pleasant aroma. Can you stay at that level of a pleasant aroma?

If we practice this, the desire then is just letting itself burn out. And if we can stay at that level of just pleasant vedanā, life is so peaceful. We don't have the urgency of desire. We don't have the stress of a self being created to fulfill them all.

The Buddha says this is really how we let suffering die away: we stay at the level of sense contact and vedanā, of knowing our sense impressions, knowing whether they're pleasant or unpleasant, but allowing desires to fade away. And they do burn away. So it's really for us to see that desires do burn—they do just fade away. If we don't indulge them, if we don't suppress them, they just burn away. It's very interesting.

Now, they come up again a second later, and you have to let that one burn away too. So it's a patient process. But to see at least one, just that it dies away, and I could be with this dinner even for a few moments with just the pleasure and no stress, no need to hurry, just appreciating—that's an example of the peaceful life we could live, and we will all live when we come to the end of suffering, when we abandon all our desires.

I just want to leave this with the reminder that we don't have to judge ourselves wrong for having desires. We can use desires skillfully to get to the end of suffering.

There's a conversation between Ānanda and a brahmin, who is asking Ānanda about the way to the end of suffering. "For what purpose, Master Ānanda, is the holy life lived under the Buddha, the ascetic Gotama?"

"It is for the sake of abandoning desire, brahmin, that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One."

"But, Master Ānanda, is there a path? Is there a way for the abandoning of this desire?"

"There is a path, brahmin. There is a way for the abandoning of this desire."

"But, Master Ānanda, what is the path? What is the way for abandoning of this desire?"

"Here, brahmin, a bhikkhu develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to desire and volitional formations of striving. He develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to energy..." and Ānanda goes through a whole lot more of them. "This, brahmin, is the path. This is the way for the abandoning of this desire."

So notice what Ānanda is saying: that we develop the basis for spiritual power due to desire. We desire our spiritual progress. We use that desire to develop our spiritual powers. So it's a bit of a conundrum, isn't it? We're using desire to get to the end of desire. We're striving to get to the end of striving.

The brahmin picks him up on this. He says, "Such being the case, Master Ānanda, the situation is interminable. It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself."

And so Ānanda answers, "Well then, brahmin, I'll question you about this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, brahmin? Did you earlier have the desire, 'I will go to the park'? And after you went to the park, did this corresponding desire subside?" He had gone to the park to meet Ānanda.

So the brahmin answers, "Yes, sir."

"Did you earlier arouse energy thinking, 'I will go to the park'? And after you went to the park, did the corresponding energy subside?"

"Yes, sir."

And Ānanda goes through them all like that.

He aroused volitional formations as well to go to the park. So he strove to go to the park. He desired to go to the park. He strove to go to the park. He got to the park. But then they all subsided. Desires simply subside after they've been fulfilled—or if we just watch them and let them burn out anyway.

So we can therefore let the desires we want to fulfill be fulfilled. Our desire is to meditate—we can act on that, we can allow that to be fulfilled. Our desire to come on retreat—we can strive like mad to go on retreat. And that desire, that striving, will simply pass away when we arrive at the retreat. We don't have to be afraid of our desirous nature, our striving nature. We can use it in the right direction.

And so the Brahman is eventually completely convinced. Ananda asks him, "Well, what do you think now, Brahman? Is the situation terminable or interminable?"

"Surely, Master Ananda, such being the case, the situation is terminable, not interminable. Magnificent, Master Ananda! From today, let Master Ananda remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life."

So although desire is the cause of suffering, this is a gradual path, and we use our desire to come to the end of suffering to get us to the end of suffering.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 6

The Third Noble Truth - The End of Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · 17 min

> *In this contemplative talk, Noirin Sheahan offers a thoughtful exploration of the Third Noble Truth—the cessation of dukkha—and the nature of Nibbāna. She begins with the classical description of Nibbāna as "the unborn, the undying, the uncreated, the unconditioned" and invites practitioners to notice what arises when reflecting on such mysterious descriptions, whether peace, inspiration, confusion, or frustration.*
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> *Drawing on Joseph Goldstein's analogy of walking through woods at night toward home, Sheahan emphasizes that while occasional reflection on Nibbāna can provide motivation and energy, our primary task remains focused on the present moment—each step of the path. She examines how the three characteristics apply to Nibbāna: while dukkha and anicca do not apply (it being described as "unshakable bliss" and "everlasting"), anattā does apply—"Nibbāna exists, but not the one who enters it." This points to Nibbāna as the reality of non-grasping.*
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> *The talk explores the Buddha's fire analogy, where saṃsāra is likened to burning in the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion, while Nibbāna represents the cooling and unbinding when fire is extinguished. Sheahan encourages practitioners to tune into subtle, quiet moments when desire fades—temporary tastes of non-grasping that our drama-oriented minds typically overlook. She acknowledges that our culture doesn't naturally value the unobtrusive and quiet, making patient practice essential for recognizing the immense peace always available in stillness.*

I thought this evening to talk a little bit about the third noble truth, the cessation of dukkha.

From the Vipassana guidelines that we were reading, the very last section offers some description of this—the goal of our path, the cessation of suffering, nibbāna. It goes: "There is the unborn, the undying, the uncreated, the unconditioned, refuge, harbour, home, perfect contentment and peace."

It's interesting to reflect on that. There are some beautiful analogies: refuge, harbour, home, perfect contentment and peace. But then, of course, there's the unborn, the undone, the uncreated, the unconditioned. That can stir confusion to some extent. What does that all mean?

I think the main thing is simply to be aware of what any reflections on nibbāna actually bring up in you. Let the reflection bring up whatever it brings up—whether it's peace and inspiration, or confusion and frustration. Allow that to be recognized, to be noted, and know that we're on the path to nibbāna. We'll find out eventually what it's actually all about.

In the main, the Buddha didn't speak much about nibbāna itself, but rather about the path to nibbāna. That's our focus too—to really work out how we stop suffering rather than spending a lot of time trying to figure out exactly what we're aiming for. What exactly is the unconditioned?

However, there is some value in also spending time trying to clarify what the goal is. Joseph Goldstein uses the analogy of walking through the woods at night. He wanted to get through the woods to reach his home. The fact that he knew his home was in that direction gave him the motivation, the stimulus, the energy, the wish to walk through the woods. He could stop and reflect on that destination to get through the woods if he got a bit dejected. But if he were to just look ahead and try to see his house at the other side of the woods, he'd probably stumble and fall and cause himself trouble.

In the same way, we can stop every now and again and reflect on nibbāna for some energy, for some stimulus to our path. But the main task is then to let go of all that and return to just this moment. Like him looking down at his feet, we take this step safely. We let go of the possible future, whatever it is, and we come back to the here and now, letting our practice lead us to nibbāna.

One way we can gain confidence that nibbāna is actually a very worthy goal is that as we do our practice, we see how it brings out the best in us and how it releases some level of stress and suffering in our lives. We can more and more trust that where we're going is actually a very worthy place.

The Buddha did use some words to describe nibbāna. One was "the end of dukkha"—that's perhaps the most common description. The end of all sense of dissatisfaction or stress or suffering of any kind. Dukkha does not apply there. He called it "unshakable bliss," and another term was "everlasting."

In that sense of everlasting, we see that transience doesn't apply—anicca doesn't apply. Nibbāna isn't a changing state like everything else in this universe that keeps slipping through our fingers. Nibbāna is unchanging, everlasting.

So dukkha and anicca do not apply. But that third characteristic we've talked about, anattā or not-self—it's arguable, and scholars do argue, but many would say that anattā does apply. Anattā applies to nibbāna in this sense: if there's a self, we're always trying

to control things and manipulate things and hold them to ourselves. Whenever we reach nibbāna, we won't be able to hold it for ourself. There would be no wish even to hold it for ourself. It's not graspable, and we won't even want to grasp at it. The self brings about boundaries and limits and defensiveness. Nibbāna is without boundary, without limit.

One way the Buddha described it is: "Nibbāna exists, but not the one who enters it." Which is a nice way to put it. Something to reflect on.

Another way of stating that would be that nibbāna is the reality of non-grasping. The self gets created to grasp onto some desire. That's happening all through our lives. Something pleasant stimulates our senses, we feel the desire, and then a sense of self gets created in order to grasp onto that, to try to hold it and make it mine.

So our practice is always to relax, to let go as much as we can. And we can get little moments ourselves. We can tune in to little—you could call them temporary nibbānas. We can get tastes of the state of not grasping, when a desire fades away. It's a very subtle moment, so we don't always tune into it, but it's really worthwhile beginning to notice that sense of the ending of a desire. You might find there's actually no sense of me or mine at that moment. There isn't a sense of stress.

There isn't a sense of anything to defend.

So it really is worth beginning to tune in to these little moments—very momentary ones that we often don't notice at all, letting the next desire come up very quickly instead. But the more we tune in and notice them, we become so interested in them that the next desire won't come up quite so quickly. Every time desire fades, we get a little momentary taste of the peace of nibbāna.

Now, it's a very quiet happiness. It doesn't call our attention, and I think that's why we miss it. We said those who are mindful are in the presence of nibbāna—nibbāna is always present, but we simply don't notice it. We don't tune in to it. And that's really because it is so subtle, so quiet, while our minds are designed to tune in to drama. As we've been discussing, for survival we need to find out where the danger is, where the good stuff is. So our minds are attuned to the dramatic, the loud, the colorful, the difficult. They don't naturally tune in to what's unobtrusive, what's quiet, what's not a threat.

It takes a lot of practice for us to begin sensing those little unobtrusive, non-dramatic moments where there's no big storyline going on, nothing to take home, no big success on offer. Those moments are actually really worth tuning in to, but we have to persuade ourselves of that. We're so goal-oriented—we want spiritual progress, and we have this

sense that there will be a big cheer when we get to nibbāna, great delight and everything. The quiet, subtle, unobtrusive little moments don't stimulate us. Our culture doesn't encourage looking for something unobtrusive, something you can't say much about, something you can't tell your friends about. It's not like a prize we tend to value—quietness and subtlety.

So we really have to train ourselves to tune in to quietness, to actually feel the value of it, to feel the immense peace that's on offer. And in those very quiet and unobtrusive moments, the mind easily wanders. That's what I've always found—we begin to lose interest as we get closer and closer to that kind of quietness. The mind starts making up all kinds of little stories. It's funny, it nearly goes delirious sometimes, just making up stories about anything and everything. So again, we just have to be patient with all of that. It's simply our minds not recognizing value, going into some sort of spin.

The Buddha did describe nibbāna as subtle, and at first he thought this state was so subtle that nobody else in the world could actually pick up on it. He wasn't going to teach at first. So we have to have a lot of patience. It does take time for subtlety to persuade us of its value, and even to persuade us that it's there. I remember one teacher saying that the first time she really noticed calm, her noting word had a little question mark on it. It was "calm?" She couldn't believe there was calmness. We really can disbelieve, not trust, and deny calmness. Possibly we're embarrassed because it's always been there—something in our mind says, "Oh my God, I've been overlooking something." There's all that embarrassment about having made a mistake, so we screen out the calmness that is always there. There will be all kinds of obstacles to noticing calm and subtlety, but the more we tune in, the more we'll have some sense of the goal of the path and its value.

When the Buddha talked about this world and nibbāna, he often used the analogy of fire—fire for this world of what's called saṃsāra, the opposite of nibbāna, this world we live in, the round of greed, hatred, and delusion. Fire going out is often the analogy for nibbāna, that moment when fire is extinguished. The word nirvāṇa is actually used, I think even commonly in India today, for cooling. People say, "Will you nirvāṇa the rice?" It's a cooling term. We have such lovely weather here this week that we can have a sense of the value of cooling. In our culture, sometimes cooling might not seem so great, but in India, with their very hot climate, cooling is greatly valued.

And fire, on the other hand, is aggressive, oppressive, threatening. So we have a sense of this world as oppressive, threatening, horrid, and then the ending of all of that—the relief when a fire goes out.

When the Buddha was enlightened, one quotation is that he surveyed the world with the eye of an awakened one. As he did so, he saw living beings burning with the many fevers and aflame with the many fires born of passion, aversion, and delusion. There's that sense that we are actually burning in our own fevers, burning in our own passions and aversion and delusion.

In the culture of India at the time, fire was thought to be trapped by its own fuel. Fire has to stay in one place—it has to be a wood fire, trapped by the wood until the wood is all burnt out. It can be trapped by other things, grass and so on, and it's trapped there until the fuel is all burnt out.

In our case, then, the fuel is sense pleasure—wanting all the lovely stuff. And then views and opinions. We are very addicted to our views and opinions as well. How we love to be right, to persuade others of our views. So that's one of the fuels for keeping us here in saṃsāra: our very tight beliefs. And often we are quite afraid to examine our deepest beliefs, and that would include the belief in self. That's a hard one for us to examine.

Now again, in India at the time of the Buddha, once the fuel was exhausted and the fire went out, the understanding was that the fire then was freed. It existed in a latent form, hidden but extending throughout the universe. So that's some sort of analogy for us of the enlightened mind, the awakened mind, existing in a latent form, hidden but extending throughout the universe. No longer in that stage bound to its fuel. Unbinding is another term for Nibbāna.

Just a quotation relevant to that: at the death of the Buddha himself, one of his disciples, Anuruddha, says, "Like a flame going out was the liberation of awareness." The fire is freed. As the flame goes out, the fire is freed. We can't see it. We can't access it anymore ourselves directly. But the belief is that it's hidden and extending throughout the universe. We have no way of knowing its whereabouts or quantifying it in any way. It's beyond our measuring, our reckoning.

So questions like "Does the Buddha exist after death?" simply can't be answered, because the Buddha's existence or non-existence after death is indescribable in our terms.

There's a conversation between the Buddha and Upasīva about this. Upasīva is trying to get the Buddha to say whether the awakened person exists after death. The Buddha says, "There is nothing by which you can measure him. That by which he can be talked about is no longer there for him. You cannot say that he does not exist. When all ways of being, all phenomena are removed, all ways of description have also been removed."

We have that mystery—that it's not describable in our phenomenology.

So that's probably a good point to end. Nibbāna is beyond description.

But just going back to the Joseph Goldstein analogy of walking through the woods at night: to reflect on Nibbāna can be useful. And it's worth asking, how do you feel? I often ask myself that. How do I feel when I reflect on these kind of mysterious sayings?

Often it does bring up hindrances. The wish to know a little bit better, for me, might bring me into dullness or aversion of some description. The fact that this can't actually be put into words can be frustrating. Obviously the path is just to bear with all of those hindrances, just let them burn out.

But what I always find is that once they have burned out, there's some new level of awareness where I'm seeing more beautiful qualities that little bit clearer. It could be peaceful sensations in the body. It could be emotions of kindness that I just hadn't really been able to access before.

I think the reflection on Nibbāna, no matter what it brings up, just allowing ourselves to sit with that will bring us towards Nibbāna.

So I think that's a good point at which to end. We'll just sit for a while.

CHAPTER 7

The Fourth Noble Truth - The Path Leading to the End of Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · 22 min

In this comprehensive talk, Noirin Sheahan offers a fresh perspective on the Fourth Noble Truth—the Noble Eightfold Path (ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga)—drawing on Stephen Batchelor's translation of 'right' as 'untangled' or 'straightened out.' This reframing invites practitioners to see the path as a process of releasing knots of tension in body and mind, rather than achieving rigid correctness.

Sheahan systematically explores all eight factors: beginning with wisdom (sammā diṭṭhi and sammā saṅkappa), she emphasizes that Buddhist understanding is embodied and courageously renewed moment by moment, not merely intellectual. The talk then examines ethical conduct—speech, action, and livelihood—with particular attention to the Buddha's emphasis on speech as a primary area for practice. Four qualities of wise speech are discussed: truthfulness, gentleness, timeliness, and purposefulness.

The teaching includes a detailed explanation of kamma as a moral law governing intention and its effects on our mental states, while clarifying that kamma is only one of several natural laws operating in the universe—alongside physics, biology, and psychology. The talk concludes with the factors of mental cultivation (sammā vāyāma, sammā sati, and sammā samādhi), showing how effort, mindfulness, and concentration deepen wisdom in a self-reinforcing cycle that leads progressively toward the complete end of dukkha.

I wanted to speak this morning on the last of these Four Noble Truths, which is the path to the end of suffering, often termed the Eightfold Path, the Noble Eightfold Path.

It's interesting, the word "noble" that's used in Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path—a translation that Stephen Batchelor uses for this is "ennobling." It ennobles us to deal with the difficulties of life this way. So it's an ennobling path. And the injunction with this path is to cultivate it.

There are eight steps, and each one is called right something or other: right view, right thought, and so on. The word "right" can sometimes bring up the judgmental mind, and we can get tight around right and wrong. So again, a translation that Stephen Batchelor developed was that the word can also refer to "straightened out" or "untangled." I think that gives a nicer idea—that we're untangling knots.

We can often feel that in our bodies, I think. Various knots of tension appear here and there and everywhere. As we sit with them as patiently as possible, they begin to just untangle, to relax a little bit. We're releasing tension from our bodies this way. In our minds as well—you know the way we say we get caught in knots of thought. So here some clarity is developing around some of those knots, at least. The mind as well releases its knots of thought. Untangling, I think, is a nice sense for this path. It's untangling us from the knots of delusion, really.

The first step is to do with our understanding, our view of the world. That's the wisdom we have been cultivating here all week. Very often in our culture, we think of understanding as "why did this happen?" We're thinking in terms of the logical mind's way of understanding—why, and then the attempt to control it. If I know why, I know how not to face that again.

The Buddha's understanding, as we know, is different. It's much more embodied, living, courageous. It's to do with refinding our wisdom again and again in this moment, rather than thinking we know it all and can hold it up here. We have to have the courage to drop. We can use our present level of wisdom, but not hold to it absolutely fast. We have to be able to re-question it if needed. If we feel that we're not acting wisely, we have to be able to re-question everything. It's that willingness to let go of our present level of wisdom and let the current situation teach us again.

This relates to the Four Noble Truths: the fact that life is unsatisfying, the fact that there is a cause to this—the cause being our rejection of life as it is, our wanting it to be our way—and the possibility of the ending of suffering when we finally surrender to that truth. Basically, we create this path moment after moment for ourselves from our previous level of understanding, bringing us as wisely as possible into situations and then learning again, relearning our wisdom again. We're creating the path all the time.

That then naturally transforms into an attitude. That's the second step of the path: right attitude, or straightened out, untangled attitude—untangling attitude. From the understanding that we're not the centre of the universe, that we have to bow to the bigger picture again and again and learn how to come into harmony with the bigger picture, our whole attitude towards ourselves and others begins to soften. We gradually expect a little bit less. We're not so absolutely dogmatic about our way always being right. Basically, what we're developing is a much more friendly, open, compassionate attitude, both to ourselves and others. Not so demanding that everything go our way, and more allowing of others to be just as they are—also of ourselves, with patience for

this deeply embedded delusion within ourselves that doesn't fully understand the way things are. A growing compassion and friendliness towards the world, towards ourselves.

Basically, I suppose that comes down to allowing rather than controlling. Seeing the way things are, finding some sort of least-resistance path around the way things are. It's not that we won't confront what we see to be wrong—that's not the case at all. It's not a path of stupidity. It's a path of increasing wisdom. If we see things that are wrong, we bring ourselves to the fore and use our wisdom to try to straighten things out. But our attitude will be a lot more caring and soft than it would have been had we not tread what we have of the path already.

In that sense, solutions are actually more likely to come through because we're more open to the possibility of good in another. If you see someone behaving badly and you immediately put them into a total enemy situation, it means you see no good in them, no potential for good in them. That usually brings out the worst in the other person. They react against that because it's obviously not true—we all have good in our nature. We can judge something as wrong without judging the other person as totally wrong.

So therefore we can enter the situation with a much more hopeful attitude towards the other person, seeing the potential, asking ourselves: how can they rescue themselves here? And people often respond much better to that kind of invitation towards their own goodness.

In general, I think we grow more flexible through practice. We become able to fit in better with life and to appreciate ourselves and others. We cultivate metta meditation—we do it formally here at night—but it's also developing naturally from our practice of vipassana. It's a natural outcome of a deeper understanding of suffering: we naturally grow more friendly to ourselves and others.

So those are the first two steps—the untangling of our delusion into wisdom, and the resulting untangling of our attitude from hostility towards friendliness and openness. The next three are to do with our interactions with the world, our basic moral behavior, how to bring forth our wisdom and friendliness into the world. There are three particular areas here that the Buddha singles out: speech, action, and livelihood.

It's interesting that he puts speech first. We'd often think of action first, but in fact, he puts speech first. To a large extent, I suppose, anybody who is even starting on the path may have reasonably cleared up a lot of their actions. We're probably not mass murderers if we're even interested in the path. But we can still be doing a lot of unnecessary harm with our speech without even noticing it. It's a part of ourselves that we're using

so often in life, and we frequently just don't notice where it's become unhelpful. Whereas with our actions, I think we have a little bit more judgment about what is wrong and right—obviously hitting others and so on is wrong.

So anyway, in practical terms, to really look at our speech. The Buddha asks us to examine four particular areas. First of all, is it truthful? That's fairly straightforward. And then, is it gentle or harsh? We can tell the truth in many different ways, and if we're telling it with a lot of harsh, blaming anger, it probably won't be heard. In that sense, we're better off just keeping it to ourselves, going away, sitting with the anger, and then coming back to say whatever needs to be said.

Another thing to consider is whether our speech is timely. If you're telling a person something difficult when they're already stressed out with many things, they're probably not going to hear you either. It becomes an extra burden to receive advice in an already stressful situation. So to really think about: is this the right time for this person to hear whatever I have to say? And of course, this applies here on retreat as well—during the silence, is it the right time to break it? To be really considering that.

And the final one is: is it purposeful? This is a difficult one for us, I think. A lot of our chatter is fairly idle, really. And the Buddha wasn't keen on idle chatter at all—which is a hard one to keep reflecting on.

Now, it's interesting that many of the suttas do start off by describing someone coming to put a question to the Buddha, and first there's some sort of polite and friendly exchange. So there must be a certain level of what we might call idle chatter—it's not recorded, but there's some level of "how are you" and "how are things going." He obviously doesn't want us to go around totally silent. There's a certain level of polite interaction needed to keep social affairs moving smoothly, to remain courteous and reassuring to one another.

But the real danger of very idle chatter is that it can move into unpleasant areas quite quickly. We can slide down into our grumpy, grouchy mood quite easily. And somehow in our culture, it's acceptable to give out about everything—we can nearly share the wound of how bad everything is. But of course, if we're doing that, we're strengthening our view that this is a horrible world and there's nothing we can do about it. That kind of chatter isn't leading us anywhere except perhaps to some sort of communal self-pity about how bad things are. And then there's backbiting about other people, which unfortunately idle chatter can very quickly turn into. We just have to be really careful and awake to what is purposeful.

So those are the areas of speech. And then in action, three areas: not harming living beings, not stealing, and not engaging in sexual misconduct—being careful about our sexuality, not causing hurt or harm. Of course, these can be shaded over into positive qualities as well. Not harming can become kindness. Not stealing can become generosity. And the lack of sexual misconduct becomes respect for one another—not looking at each other merely as objects of sexual gratification, but having respect for people, young and old, regardless of their sexual attractiveness.

And then in the area of livelihood, the Buddha really just spells out wrong livelihoods. He says one is to trade in weapons of any sort—making or trading in weapons. Poisons as well. Intoxicants—that's a deep one to look at. If you're involved in the pub trade at all, he would say no, that's just encouraging delusion. And the other area would be slaughter, the whole area of butchery.

But of course, we can bring right livelihood around to the more positive and simply see: are we giving service to others in whatever our livelihood? Are we promoting happiness here?

So there are the three areas of morality and ethics that the Buddha mentions. And there can be a confusion in our culture. We think we should really follow our own wisdom, find out for ourselves what's right and wrong, and not be dictated to regarding what kind of speech we can have, what kind of actions we can have. That's a more modern approach to ethics, whereas the Buddha is definitely asking us to be much more constrained in behaviour.

I think it's a good question: why accept this constraint? It's worth looking into a little. Certainly when I first came to Buddhism, the whole area of morality held very little interest for me. I sensed that my morality wasn't that bad—I wasn't murdering people anyway. I didn't have a sense that my morality was any sort of problem area for me. All I really wanted was to learn how to meditate and get enlightened.

The Buddha likens this to rowing a boat without first untying it from the shore. You can imagine yourself rowing and rowing away, but you've never untied the boat, so you're getting nowhere. Learning to meditate without taking an interest in how you're putting your goodness into the world is just like that—it's not getting anywhere. Your meditation won't progress until you start seeing it in the bigger context of how you're interacting with the world.

The reason for this is fairly obvious: our behaviour affects our mind. If we're speaking carelessly to people, being harsh with them, that engenders a sort of harsh voice in our own mind. Therefore meditation becomes much harder. If we're acting heedlessly,

not caring for others, not really looking at them in any sensitive way, that can produce mental restlessness, an underlying guilt or worry, because we are closing off to so much in life at the expense of any inner peace. We can close off to other people to a certain extent, but in actual fact that closes down some part of our own heart. So we're open to a lot of worry and guilt there, and again, it's hard to meditate.

All of this comes from the law of kamma. If you speak or act with good intention, then good will come of it for you in the sense that you will have the reward of peace of mind. Your own happiness comes from good speech and good actions—those with good intentions. And the opposite is true as well. If you speak or act with either carelessness or ill will, that will disturb your own mind. It's a law of the universe, the Buddha says, that we just can't get away with. We can't get away with carelessness or ill will. It's a moral law.

Now, always remember that it's the intention that matters. Sometimes we act or speak with good intentions, but somehow it doesn't come out right. It's only the intention that counts. If harm somehow comes from something we say to a person, yet we had acted with good intention in saying it, that's okay as regards our own mind.

You can actually experience this. You can experience kamma working in this way. Perhaps take an interest before doing something kind—like giving a birthday present, for example. When you're planning to give the birthday present, see if that's a happy state of mind. Usually it is. If you're giving it with generosity and the right intentions, it's usually happy. I get happy thinking of somebody else becoming happy. Then as you're giving the present, as you're saying "happy birthday, here you are"—is that a happy state of mind? That's usually a happy state of mind too. So we can see kamma working there.

Afterwards, when you reflect back and think, "Well, that was a good thing to do," that's again a happy state of mind. You can be pleased with yourself and congratulate yourself.

The fourth way that kamma works is that when we're kind to people, they usually are kind to us in return. We tend to move more in social circles that help us develop, as opposed to ones that pull us down all the time with backbiting and so on. It works at that social level for us as well.

Then there's the fifth level, which we either have to take on faith or perhaps reject altogether, or just keep an open mind about: in some mysterious way, the universe can reward good action. If you steal a towel from a hotel, you're bound to lose a sock in the laundry—that kind of thing. If you do something wrong, the universe will pay you back. And if you do something right, the universe will pay you back.

This level is very hard to see because the actions can be separated by who knows how many years—they say even lifetimes. We do see that good fortune comes to people who are doing an awful lot of wrong. We also see good people who experience a lot of misfortune. In that sense, it's hard to put together.

But it's also important to remember that the Buddha said kamma was only one of the laws of the universe. The other laws—the ones we're more familiar with, the whole law of physics, how nature works—all those kinds of things like earthquakes and tsunamis are just caused by physics.

You know, if we're caught in one, it doesn't mean it's our bad kamma. It's just the law of nature working there. So the Buddha said, yes, there's a natural law too. Not everything is your bad kamma. That's a misconception.

The whole area of biology, too, is a separate law of the universe. Genetics, for example—if you have some genetic illness, that's not your bad kamma. It's biology. And the whole area of psychology as well. What is our IQ? Do we have good memory? Various mental illnesses. Kamma is only one of those laws that actually govern how things work in the universe.

So basically, don't work backwards from kamma. Don't say, "I have this illness, therefore it's my bad kamma." It's not to work backwards. But the way we can use the law usefully is to work forwards. If I speak or act now with good intention, good will come of it. We can have confidence in that.

So that question—can I not decide for myself what's right and wrong? The Buddha would say definitely no there. You're heading right into trouble. The universe has morality built into it. This law of kamma is a law of the universe. It's an interesting thing that we live in a moral universe.

Those are the steps of our behavior in the world. And the final steps of the Eightfold Path are to do with our mental cultivation: right or untangled effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Three steps there.

We're making the effort to let go of thoughts, for example, to come back to the present moment again and again. That's our effort, our right effort that we've been putting in all week. Effort then cultivates mindfulness—this direct knowing of our experience, knowing what the footstep feels like at the beginning, the middle, and the end. And that in turn cultivates concentration, the ability of the mind to rest in present experience, to take it in, to see the sensations and feelings, to feel how they're changing so rapidly.

And that in turn deepens our wisdom. It might be the wisdom of anicca there, if you're just noticing how sensations are quickly changing and turning and slipping through your fingers, that you can't control anything. All of that feeds your wisdom of the truth of the universe—these anicca, dukkha, anattā—the transience, the fact that you can't control it, the fact that it won't satisfy your actual happiness needs. So you're back again at the beginning with a deeper understanding.

In that sense, the path develops from itself. Our efforts here at this time are bringing deeper wisdom. We bring them out into the world. That will help our meditation to be more deep. The next time we come to meditation, that will help our wisdom, which will transform our attitude, and we'll bring better actions out into the world.

So it keeps on developing from itself and leads eventually to the complete end of all sense of stress and suffering in life.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 8

Introduction to the Mahāsī Meditation Practice

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this foundational talk opening a five-day retreat, Noirin Sheahan provides a comprehensive introduction to the Mahāsī Sayādaw's approach to vipassanā meditation. She traces the technique's roots to the Buddha's own spiritual journey, explaining how his childhood memory of alert curiosity combined with relaxed attention became the basis for insight meditation. The talk grounds practitioners in the Four Noble Truths—dukkha, the cause of suffering through desire, the cessation of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path—showing how these discoveries emerged directly from the Buddha's meditative investigation.

Sheahan explains the distinctive features of the Mahāsī method: the noting technique that uses short mental labels to sharpen perception and direct attention toward present experience, the development of momentary concentration (as distinct from samatha jhāna), and the practice of slowing down all activities. She draws on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as the textual foundation and clarifies the two levels of concentration—vitakka (directing the mind) and vicāra (sustained contact with experience)—using the analogy of a bee approaching and landing on a flower.

The talk offers practical guidance on common pitfalls, including over-effort in noting, getting caught in finding the perfect word, and the importance of noting intentions to cultivate conscious, deliberate action. Sheahan emphasizes that this technique develops intuitive intelligence—a direct, embodied understanding that works from the bottom up, bypassing our habitual stories and confusion. She illustrates this with a memorable personal story about transforming irritation into compassion through mindful observation, demonstrating how misperception causes suffering and how clear seeing naturally opens the heart.

Tonight I want to talk about the Mahāsī meditation technique: where it came from, what qualities it develops, special features of the technique, and some pitfalls we can fall into.

This Mahāsī technique is a particular approach to Vipassanā or insight meditation. It's the form of meditation the Buddha adopted when he realized that none of the spiritual techniques he'd already learned were working for him.

His spiritual journey had followed from what we would now call a midlife crisis, when he was suddenly exposed to the reality of sickness, ageing, and death. This had started a period of intense suffering, enough to drive him away from his comfortable home and happy marriage to take up the life of a wandering ascetic.

Over the following years, he tried two different approaches to spiritual training which were being practiced in his day. One developed transcendent meditation states, while the other was based on very austere asceticism. When he saw that neither of these were answering his need to make sense of life, he realized he would have to find his own spiritual path.

The transcendent meditation had cultivated happy, peaceful mental states, while the ascetic training had invited hardship and suffering. He decided to steer a course between these two extremes—a middle way. He wouldn't see either happiness or suffering as the goal. The goal was to find a way to stop the suffering he felt from the knowledge that sickness, ageing, and death were in store for himself and for everyone he loved.

A memory came back of an incident in his childhood, where he had been watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. He had been alert and curious, happy to be watching all the details of the ceremony, and also peaceful, at ease, not hoping for anything special to happen. He now recognized the spiritual potential of that mental state. If there was a way to live peacefully with the knowledge of death, his intuition told him that this combination of alert curiosity and relaxed attention would lead him there. He sensed his own potential to learn how to stop suffering.

While as a child he had been absorbed by watching what was happening around him, he realised he could turn that focus inward, become absorbed by watching his own moment-to-moment experience—his physical experience of sitting, breathing, walking, as well as his mental experience of thoughts and emotions. This is what we now term Vipassanā or insight meditation, also known as mindfulness meditation.

We can imagine the Buddha was going through various shades of grief and depression because of his acute apprehension of mortality, and probably also a desperate anxiety to find a way forward—not unlike our predicament much of the time. The insight that followed his childhood memory gave him the clue that the way through all these conflicting emotions was to observe them in Vipassanā.

The traditional story goes that once he made this determination to follow the middle way between joy and pain, it only took him six hours to reach the fully enlightened state.

When he afterwards started teaching others how to follow in his footsteps, he described his understanding in terms of four truths he had learned along the way, which we now know as the Four Noble Truths.

First was the truth of dukkha, usually translated as suffering, but better understood as unsatisfactoriness. He had detected this dukkha in all experience—not only in grief, depression and so on, but also in states of happiness and joy. When we examine these mindfully, we notice a subtle anxiety associated with the knowledge that these beautiful states are fragile and easily fade away. Usually we leap to conclusions here, blame ourselves, blame others, blame circumstances. But the Buddha's careful observation led him to conclude that blame only confused the issue, compounded the pain. The underlying reality was simply that the beautiful states of happiness and joy had faded.

Probing deep into his experience of body and mind, the Buddha had come to understand that it was all by nature unstable, uncontrollable, and therefore unsatisfactory. This sounds like a discovery that would lead to even deeper depression, despair, and maybe even suicide. But that original intuition that this method of meditation could lead him to the end of suffering proved stronger than any such temptations.

We can imagine him relaxing, becoming so sensitive to his experience that he could say, "This here is the feeling of depression. And this slight pushing on the edge of it—this is the desire to get rid of depression." And to his amazement, no doubt, he found that what was really hurting was not the depression itself, but the desire to be rid of it. And then, seeing that he could, for a moment at least, relax and let go of that desire—with that, the depression became bearable.

You can imagine that discovery lifted his heart, gave him a shot of joy. So then he notices, "This here is the feeling of joy. And this slight pulling on the edge of it is the desire to possess the joy, prolong it, become forever joyful." And while the joy itself is lovely, the desire to own it, prolong it, become it, is stressful.

Thus, tracking his own experience, he was able to convince himself that desire was causing suffering—whether it was the desire to be rid of unpleasant stuff like depression, or the desire to get more of the pleasant stuff like joy. This he later described as the second noble truth: desire is the cause of suffering.

And then came the real breakthrough. As he continued to watch desire with calm, curious attention, feeling the suffering it caused, he was drawn ever deeper into the roots of his experience. And there came a moment of profound stillness when all desire naturally faded away. With that, all suffering stopped and there was deep peace.

It may have only been momentary, because until we're fully enlightened, new desires keep arising. But luckily for us, he recognized that brief moment when desire faded as an experience of what he had been searching for: the cessation of suffering, a taste of nibbāna. This he later taught as his third noble truth—that there is an end to suffering.

Although the whole wearying process of wanting this, not wanting that, started up again, he now knew there was a way to work with this deeply ingrained conditioning. Studying his own emotions, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviour in Vipassanā, he was able to fine-tune his understanding of what caused suffering and what brought it to an end. This allowed him to work out a practical path that could be followed for spiritual awakening. He calls this the Noble Eightfold Path, and we know this as the Fourth Noble Truth.

There are three sections to the Path: wisdom, morality, and meditation training. Here we're mainly concerned with the third part, but we're based within the wisdom set by the Buddha in his Dhamma teachings, and having taken the precepts, we're working within a framework of morality.

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the remainder of his life teaching others how to reach the same goal. But he stressed that words alone could only point in the direction of truth. Each person has to search for, detect, and realise the truth within their own experience.

Thus, we don't have to accept any of the teachings on blind faith. We don't have to think of ourselves as Buddhist or even believe in the historic figure of the Buddha. We can experiment with the Dhamma, see if these teachings prove a useful guide in our lives. The motive inspiring our practice can thus be to ask whether the Dhamma is really true, manifesting right here and now in my life. We answer the question by practicing Vipassana, examining our experience with a calm, curious, attentive observation.

But we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves. Remember that we're on a training course here. We're not expecting full enlightenment. That's a very worthy long-term goal for meditation practice, but we need to put it aside for now, or else it will get in the way.

Joseph Goldstein gives the analogy of walking home through the woods at night. He could see the lights of his house ahead in the distance. That was his goal, to get to the house. But to make any progress, he had to look down at the ground in front of him, take it one step at a time. Looking ahead while stepping usually meant a tumble. In the same way, thoughts about enlightenment or perfect happiness get in the way of the

meditation skills we're trying to learn here and now. So we have to let go of our desires for psychological well-being and spiritual insight and instead focus on learning the technique, trusting that the process will, in its own good time, bring about insight and happiness.

It's best to think of the retreat as essentially a training course. We're training ourselves in the art of meditation as taught by the Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. And like any training you've ever done, it's going to take time and effort and patience.

The Mahasi Sayadaw was a Buddhist monk teaching in a monastery in the north of Burma until 1948, when he was asked to come to Yangon and teach meditation to lay people. This was an unusual request, as it was widely held in Burma at that time that any progress in meditation required a remove from all worldly affairs so as to dedicate one's time fully to spiritual training for many months and years. This allowed very deeply absorbed states of concentration to develop, known as samatha jhanas. It was only monastics who had the necessary time and seclusion to master these states.

The training technique that the Mahasi Sayadaw had learned and practiced did not require the deep absorptions, but instead developed what is known as momentary concentration. It's not that the concentration only lasts for a moment—it is the same strength as various levels of jhana. The distinction between the two is that samatha focuses on one object, for example the breath, whereas Vipassana lets the focus switch between many objects. One moment we're aware of breathing, the next of hearing, the next of some emotion arising, and so on. Thus in Vipassana, the deep level of concentration is experienced over many moments of consciousness.

The Mahasi Sayadaw recognised that people could develop this level of concentration within a relatively short time frame, and thus that this meditation technique was ideally suited for lay people who could perhaps only make a retreat of a few weeks at the most. This is in keeping with the fact that one of the most prized of all the Buddha's teachings, the discourse on establishing mindfulness, was given in the townland of Kuru to lay people as well as to monastics. The Mahasi technique is based around many of the instructions given in this particular discourse, the Satipatthana Sutta.

While some Vipassana training techniques encourage a broad, open awareness, the Mahasi technique focuses on detail. In the first place, on the sensations of the abdomen caused by breathing, or else the sensations in the feet caused by walking. We track these until the mind calms down and becomes interested in present experience. Then we let whatever calls attention become the new focus. It could be a sound, an itching sensation, some discomfort in the body perhaps. We allow our attention to go wherever

it is naturally called. And if nothing in particular calls, we go back to the breath at the abdomen, the feeling of the tummy rising and falling. This cultivates momentary concentration, where the mind can focus on each little detail of what attracts attention.

There are two other aspects to the Mahasi approach that distinguish it from other forms of Vipassana training. One is noting, and making a special effort to note intentions. Another is slowing down all physical activities to a snail's pace.

Noting involves making a short mental note of what you're experiencing. When feeling the rising and falling movements of the breath, we note "rising, rising, falling, falling." This helps draw attention more closely to those sensations. Whereas if we don't make that mental note, we might be only vaguely aware that we're breathing. When we make the mental notes "rising, falling," we are engaging the perceptual faculty of the mind, the ability to discern one thing from another—knowing red from green, hot from cold, and so on.

Perception is a very powerful mental process and a very important aspect of the spiritual path. When Ananda asked Sariputta why it was that people did not attain liberation, Sariputta told him that it was basically a problem of misperception. Because we perceive things wrongly, our minds end up in a confused turmoil that obscures the underlying peace of Nibbana. Perception conditions all our thoughts, words and deeds.

I remember one walking meditation where the person in front of me kept sniffing—every footstep, sniff, sniff. It was driving me bananas. I was doing my best to watch the irritation, but the thoughts kept pouring out. Why doesn't he just blow his nose? How could anybody be so rude, so inconsiderate?

After several minutes of torture, I saw his hand go into his pocket and pull out a tissue. I watched with bated breath, heard him blow his nose, and gave a deep sigh of relief. But before he'd even put the tissue away, there was another sniff.

To my own amazement, my response wasn't anger, but compassion.

It was only afterwards, on reflection, that I realised what I'd been reacting to was not the sound of sniffing, but my own presumption that this was a thoughtless, inconsiderate person who wasn't polite enough to blow his nose. The sniff following the nose blow showed me that whatever was causing him to sniff—perhaps he had asthma or an allergy—couldn't be fixed by simply blowing his nose. He wasn't a thoughtless, inconsiderate person after all.

It was such a joy to be relieved of all my fury. He sniffed away at every footstep till the end of the walking session, but it no longer bothered me at all.

Although the sounds were the same, they were heard differently. The pre-nose blow sniffs were heard within a tumult of indignation and anger. The post-nose blow ones were heard with relief and compassion. In fact, I grew fonder of him with every sniff, because he had taught me such a valuable Dharma lesson.

There's another point to draw from this incident. It was the fact that compassion arose spontaneously once I saw that the sniffing was due to illness. I'm using the word "I" here, but in fact the thinking mind that I identify with was totally surprised by compassion. It had expected an even deeper burst of anger. The thinking mind only slowly unravelled the knot and realised that anger was due to a misperception.

This is an example of intuitive intelligence. It's in direct contact with reality—in this case, the sound of sniffing. It experiences the sound without presumptions about rudeness and inconsideration, sees that the sniff doesn't connect directly to those angry thoughts. It doesn't need the convoluted logic of the thinking mind, but understands things in a flash.

The insight that comes from intuitive intelligence is not just intellectual. When it sees clearly, the heart opens. Again, this is instantaneous. By comparison, my thinking mind took several seconds to work out why my attitude had changed from anger to compassion. Intuitive intelligence is primary. The thinking mind catches up slowly.

This illustrates why we are taking such pains to train ourselves to become aware of present experience rather than lost in thought. It's easy for us to dismiss detail like the sensations of the tummy rising as irrelevant, but they're providing the training ground for mindfulness. Just knowing those sensations is a peek beyond thought. And slowly we learn to trust in a wordless intelligence that is in direct contact with reality, not influenced by beliefs and presumptions. It's this level of intelligence that we need for insight into the true nature of reality.

We suffer because of our misperceptions. For example, we mistake what is transient as enduring, reliable. Our house, our body, our mobile phone—we expect them to be there when we need them. We're distraught when they break down. That's because we rely on our thinking mind far too much. At the level of direct experience, a million flashes of colour might pass through the eyes and we think, "that's my phone." The thought gives us a feeling of certainty about those million flashes of colour, which we might not even see anymore. But we still believe that my phone is there where I saw it a moment ago.

By training ourselves to experience life directly, moment to moment, we start to break down our preconceived notions of reality. It might be during a very ordinary experience like tracking the feet as we walk. We might feel the foot touch the floor and realise, "Gosh, this is totally different to how it felt a moment ago as it moved forward." At one level, nothing has changed—we know we're just walking. But the experience is now being seen through new eyes, with avid interest in each transient sensation. We feel totally alive, in touch with our bodies, with the environment.

This vibrant perspective may only last a few moments, but it's a genuine insight into the nature of reality. Each glimpse into a world without the filter of thoughts and conception deepens our faith in the practice. Slowly, we learn to see, as the Buddha did, that all is transitory, a magic show, and that it's a mistake to believe this magic show can deliver anything but sorrow while we try to hang on to what we like and get rid of what we dislike.

To promote these glimpses of the world unfettered by thoughts and ideas, Vipassana practice trains our attention away from the thinking mind and towards sensory experience. It's ironic that the noting word itself is a thought. We're using thought to bring us beyond thought.

Say we were building an observation tower. We want to be high up in the air, above all houses and trees and whatever else will get in the way of our vision. We want to be well off the ground, but we build our tower from materials we take from the ground, like wood and steel. Each time we want to go a bit further up, we need more from the earth to build another step, another floor.

Similarly, the word "rising" directs attention away from all the thoughts we'd otherwise be getting lost in. But we're not interested in the noting word—that would be like going up to the top of the observation tower only to stare at the floor beneath us. The noting word just serves to direct attention. What we're really interested in are those sensations in the tummy. They are our direct contact with sensory reality.

When we're directing the mind using the noting word, we're at the first level of concentration in vipassana, called *vitaka* in Pali. We're gathering the mind. If we can keep doing that throughout the retreat, this is excellent practice.

You may notice that at some moments the mind gets fascinated with its present experience. We're absolutely riveted by an itching sensation, for example, really wanting to feel every little tingle. At that stage, we often forget to note. And that's fine—there's no need. The noting has already served its purpose. We're up in our observation tower, seeing clearly. We don't need to build any higher.

This is the second level of concentration, *vichara* in Pali. An analogy often used is a bee among flowers. The flowers are swaying around in a breeze, so the bee has to track the flower, move around with it. This is *vitaka*, where we're tracking the experience using noting words. There comes a moment when the bee gets close enough to land on the flower. Even though the flower is still bobbing around, she no longer has to make any effort. She's being carried around with the flower. This is *vichara*, the second level of concentration, where there is an immediate, direct contact with itchiness. It's absorbing all your attention.

Don't worry if the noting stops when you get riveted by the direct experience of reality—but you have to start it again as soon as you lose that level of concentration. Don't think of the loss as a problem or a failure. It's the same for the bee. Once she's sipped the nectar from the flower, she must fly off in search of another. Similarly, we spend a few moments sipping the nectar of direct experience. Everything is vivid, fascinating. Then our desire to understand things conceptually gets the better of us and we withdraw into our world of thought again. The itchy sensation may seem fuzzy, distant, confusing.

This is part of the natural process of learning about direct experience. So long as you don't give in to the desire to think your way to enlightenment, it's not a problem. It's just the way we learn. All you need to do is start making the effort to direct the mind again using the noting technique. Sometimes a note like "wondering, wondering" allows the mind the space it needs to take in the wonder of that little glimpse beyond thought. After a while, the itchiness or some other sensation in the body may call attention again.

A couple of common mistakes happen with the noting technique. Firstly, we can get into knots trying to find exactly the right word. Is this sensation itching or stinging? Is this a feeling of anger or frustration? As soon as you notice you're trying to find exactly the right word, stop fussing and just use the simplest word that comes to mind. In fact, the words "thinking" and "feeling" cover everything. The noting word is only to direct the mind towards sensations and feelings, away from thoughts. If it happens that you can't stop trying to get the right word, try the noting word "thinking, thinking"—because that's what's happening. You are thinking about what word is best.

Another common mistake is to put too much emphasis on the note, as though we're shouting at ourselves. If this happens, if the note sounds loud and gets in the way of the sensations and feelings, then deliberately soften it. I've heard the note described as a feather brushing against whatever it's noting—a very light touch.

Sometimes the sound of the note just won't soften. We're pounding it out and can't stop. This is usually a sign of over-effort. We're so determined to do the practice well that we're getting all frenzied and uptight. If this happens, relax all effort for a while. Remind yourself that there's no exam coming up, that any new skill takes a lot of time and patience to learn. And if the moment you go back to noting that same frenzied pounding starts up, that means some underlying anxiety has surfaced. Perhaps you tend to be perfectionist and can't bear to think that you may be making any mistake.

This is actually to be welcomed. We want to allow our many underlying anxieties to surface in Vipassana—to learn to recognise them, to work with them mindfully. You can note "uptight" or "frustrated" or "trying to get it right" and allow yourself to feel that very experience. In time, this will show us how to live more patiently with perfectionism.

We can also listen out for any emotional tone in the note. Is it neutral? Perhaps it's tense with anger? If so, we can switch to noting "anger" instead, becoming curious about the experience of anger. Thus, the tone of the note can be a very helpful indicator of some buried emotion that we might otherwise miss.

But be careful. It's very easy to get curious about *why* we're angry rather than the experience of anger itself. To start thinking about the cause is to go down a rabbit hole. But the moment-to-moment experience can be a revelation. Sometimes anger simply disappears in a flash when we become aware of it. Sometimes we have to work at it for a long time before there's any relief. Like in my sniffing experience, I had been noting anger for a few minutes before that magic moment where the intuitive intelligence darted forth to make sense of it all.

This also illustrates how the intuitive intelligence is working away even in a bout of anger. It doesn't matter what we're aware of—awareness itself is the key. So there's no need to judge anger as wrong, judge greed as wrong, judge confusion or fear or anxiety as wrong. So long as we're maintaining awareness, our intuitive intelligence is at the ready, taking in what is happening, learning to see things as they really are.

The last thing I want to say about the noting technique is that it fosters ongoing mindfulness. This is because of its link with perception. If we perceive something, no matter how vaguely, we naturally want to perceive it more clearly.

Say you're looking out your window. You're vaguely aware of trees and bushes, but not really interested, in a bit of a daydream. Then a squirrel jumps from a branch, but all you see is a flash of motion. Suddenly you're alert, looking intently at the garden,

trying to figure out what it was that caught your eye. This shows the stimulating power of perception—it's woken you up from your vague daydream, brought you into present experience.

Now, that doesn't necessarily mean you are now being mindful as you scan the garden wondering what caught your eye. Mostly we are so busy looking *for* something that we forget to register that the basic experience is one of looking, of seeing. The same thing can happen in meditation. The noting gets us so interested in the detail of what we're seeing or hearing or sensing that we forget that the basic experience is one of seeing, hearing, sensing. For that we need to take a step back, stop trying to achieve anything at all—even to see or hear or sense things in detail.

We need to balance the stimulation provided by noting by focusing on whatever will help calm us down, become aware that we're seeing, hearing, sensing. For most people, the focus on the breath is naturally relaxing, but not for everyone. When I first started practising, a panicky feeling emerged as soon as I brought my attention to the abdomen. Bhante explained it as underlying fears that were manifesting on the breath. Once I heard that, I was delighted, as it gave me a ready way to work with fear, which I already knew was undermining my life.

But I also needed an alternative to the breath as a calming focus. In this case, the Mahasi recommends touching points. For example, focus attention on the buttocks touching the cushion, the hands on the lap. So if the belly moving up and down as you breathe feels agitating rather than neutral or pleasant, then see what physical sensations would bring a degree of calm—the hands, the feet, the weight of the body pressing on the cushion. Use the noting word "touching, touching" to draw attention away from thought and ground it in the body.

Another aspect of calming the mind is to maintain mindfulness outside the meditation hall. Being fully present during our daily activities helps the mind to settle. The noting technique is a great support here, as we so easily forget to be mindful outside of formal practice. If we get lazy and stop noting, then the mind quickly runs away into daydreams and thoughts. Although this feels a lot easier than noting, it's only a short-term feel-good, as the mind is getting stirred up by its habitual desires and delusion. And that isn't calming at all, as we find when we next try to meditate.

The Buddha likened the practice to swimming upstream against the tide of habitual desires. So no wonder it feels like hard work to keep noting during ordinary activities like walking to the dining room, going to the bathroom. Remember, we're swimming

upstream, training the mind to focus on present experience. Another feature of the Mahasi technique that helps bring us into the here and now is to slow down. We walk slowly, open doors slowly, eat slowly, and so on.

The slow pace quietens the mind and develops respect for our present experience. Instead of rushing to the meditation hall, all eager to start meditation, we take an interest in walking slowly toward the meditation hall—already meditating, already sensitive to present experience.

Slowing down also helps to sharpen our attention. We notice many little sensations in each footstep, for example. In turn, this extra sensitivity helps our minds to get more interested, more steady, more present.

Both of these techniques—slowing down and noting—help us to strengthen a very powerful aspect of the Eightfold Path: conscious, intentional activity. Noting intentions is important because the intention behind any action sows a seed of kamma. If we act out of greed, we reap the fruits of greed, growing ever more selfish and needy. If we act out of anger, we reap the fruits of anger, always ready to blame, losing friends, growing more bitter and isolated.

Most of the time we don't notice the intention behind our actions. We go through our days on autopilot, and so we reap the fruits of mindlessness, growing ever more entranced within our mental bubble, ever less sensitive to the reality around us.

Here on retreat it's a time to start sensitising yourself to these many intentions that govern our future. Make them deliberate, considered. If we rush towards the meditation hall, we won't notice any intentionality at all. But if we slow down, we notice when we have to turn, or put on our shoes, or open a door. Each of these can then be done deliberately by first noting the intention: "intending to turn," then turning; "intending to walk," then walking; "intending to bend down," then bending down, and so on.

Here we're sowing the powerful kamma seed of mindfulness, which is the key to waking up and living well—conscious of our impact on the world, sensitive to others and to our environment.

The technique is a demanding one, and there might be times when you feel totally fed up and discouraged. At those times, it's good to remember that every spiritual path is going to bring us to the edge of our comfort zone. That's actually the point of deepest learning. So "totally fed up and discouraged" is the ideal setting for practice. If we can somehow persuade ourselves to keep at it, we will be doing ourselves a great favour in the long run. I do hope you succeed. And if you're really disheartened, come and find me. Talking the problem through will often help.

In summary, it's best to think of the retreat as a training course. You are learning Vipassanā, a meditation technique that involves a curious, open-minded scrutiny of present experience. This is the form of meditation developed by the Buddha, which led him to full awakening and his comprehensive picture of moral psychology that has survived 2,500 years of scrutiny.

Vipassanā trains our intuitive intelligence—an understanding of ourselves and the world we live in that is not limited by prejudices and opinions but emerges from direct experience. Intuitive intelligence works from the bottom up, you could say, from embodied awareness, making sense of life at the level of sensations and feelings and then feeding its understanding to the thinking mind. This intuitive intelligence can see through our stories and confusion, as in my sniffing example. Ultimately, it lets us follow the footsteps of the Buddha to full enlightenment.

The Mahasi technique is a particular form of Vipassanā training. It relies on attention to detail and momentary concentration. Whatever calls our attention becomes the focus for meditation. This form is particularly suited to lay people, as it facilitates insight even within a relatively short timescale.

To practise according to the Mahasi method, we use a noting word to direct attention toward present experience. This sharpens perception, stimulates alertness, and supports mindful investigation. To balance these, we need to foster tranquillity, which is done by choosing a calming focus for attention—usually the breath at the abdomen or the feet while walking—by slowing down all activities to a snail's pace, and last but by no means least, maintaining mindfulness all day long. We also make an effort to note intentions, which fosters the choice to be mindful in daily activities rather than just lost in autopilot.

It's a challenging technique, so we need to be prepared to feel frustrated, confused, perhaps disheartened from time to time—but at other times, hopefully, inspired, maybe agog with wonder, and assured that this is a valuable practice, worth going through all the pain and torture that it takes to find the path to the end of suffering.

May your retreat be very beneficial. May it give you confidence that you too have the potential for full awakening, perfect peace and harmony.

CHAPTER 9

Hindrances and Factors of Enlightenment - read by Marie Caroll

Noirin Sheahan · 48 min

> *This teaching offers an intimate and practical exploration of the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa) and the seven factors of enlightenment (bojjhaṅga), presenting them not as abstract concepts but as lived experiences in meditation. Noirin Sheahan begins by normalizing the difficulties every meditator encounters—sensual desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt—framing each hindrance as a form of dukkha and therefore a golden opportunity for understanding.*
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> *The talk provides detailed guidance for working with each hindrance mindfully rather than fighting against them. When we cannot simply let go of a hindrance, we let it become the focus of meditation itself, feeling its energies and tensions with curiosity rather than resistance. Sheahan draws from personal experience, including her own encounters with sensual desire while writing and her experience of restlessness following major surgery, illustrating how mindful investigation transforms obstacles into teachers.*
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> *The second half introduces the seven factors of enlightenment using Bhante Bodhidhamma's image of wild geese flying in V-formation: mindfulness (sati) leads, while three stimulating factors—energy (viriya), investigation of dhamma (dhamma-vicaya), and joy (pīti)—form the wide flank, balanced by three calming factors—concentration (samādhi), equanimity (upekkhā), and tranquility (passaddhi)—in the slipstream. This teaching emphasizes that enlightenment factors are practical qualities to be cultivated in every meditation session, not lofty ideals. The practice becomes one of noticing, appreciating, and making much of even small movements toward awakening, understanding that it is the journey itself that counts.*

Hindrances and Factors of Enlightenment

We usually start our practice with high hopes and great determination, but after a while the rot sets in. We can't stop planning our next holiday. We get annoyed with ourselves for being so distracted and try another few breaths, but we're so tense we can't feel anything in the body. We decide we're hopeless at meditation and should never have come on retreat. Misery sets in, we give up, and soon we're dozing.

All such difficulties in meditation are termed hindrances, and they are completely normal—part and parcel of spiritual life. Every hindrance is a form of suffering, of dukkha. Remember, dukkha includes even minor irritations. Our job as we grope our way towards liberation is to understand dukkha, to fully understand it. Each hindrance is a golden opportunity.

But there's a balance to be struck between welcoming the hindrance and relaxing so as to feel its dukkha as a moment-to-moment experience. It's through sensations and feelings that we learn the Dhamma. We can overdo the welcome—rejoice at the first hint of suffering, delight in the chance to propel ourselves towards liberation, and imagine ourselves as courageous warriors certain of victory. But the felt experience of dukkha is not at all delightful. It can feel like a deep wound. Only by embracing the wounds of humanity can we glimpse what lies beyond. For this, the warrior in us needs to admit their vulnerability, feel their wounds, and take care of themselves. It's quite a challenge to get the balance right—lifelong learning. An endless supply of patience is required.

The Buddha described five hindrances: sense desire, aversion, dullness and lethargy, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Don't worry if you can't work out which box your difficulty falls into. Just do your best to maintain mindfulness, knowing there's some hindrance afoot. After a while, the particular flavour of the difficulty may become more obvious.

First, we have sensual desire, stimulated by lovely sights, sounds, tastes, sensations, and aromas. In Buddhism, the mind is also considered as a sense door, and there is a lot of pleasure to be had from mental activities. Why else do we enjoy reading, watching a film, planning? In fact, this is the main area of sensual desire that comes up during meditation. We're trying to follow the breath, but daydreams about food or sex or the great novel we're going to write are much more enticing than the sensation of breathing. The usual reaction for most of us is to get annoyed with ourselves and redouble our efforts to follow the breath. But a moment's inattention and we're off in fantasy land again.

I always liked to write talks around personal experiences and was racking my brains trying to remember one, until I recognised what was blocking all my memories. It was the sensual desire happening right now as I longed for a good example. This illustrates the main problem with the hindrances: we're so driven by them that we don't notice what's driving us. Fish will be the last to discover water.

When we notice we've got lost in fantasy several times, we need to take a step back and ask ourselves, what's going on here? In my case, I'd acknowledge that I'm trying to write a Dhamma talk. Very often that simple acknowledgement brings perspective, and I can reflect that no Dhamma talk will bring lasting happiness, whereas meditation practice does bring me in that direction.

Sometimes we just can't let go. We can't be bothered following the breath because we're so intent on indulging our fantasy. In this case, we let sensual desire become the focus for mindfulness. We can use the noting word "desire, desire" as we feel the experience. As I explore this now, I feel pleasant sensations in my head, along with a very enticing imagery light that seems to contain the perfect example for the Dhamma talk. There's tension in the jaws and my chest. The breath for the moment is still. It's as if I don't want to breathe for fear of disturbing my wonderful example of sensual desire.

As I continue to watch, the bright light gradually dims and fades. The tension relaxes. The breath flows normally again. Desire has now burnt itself out. Because I've been mindful of the hindrance, I've undermined the force of desire inside me. The next time desire arises, I find it easier to persuade myself to let it go. This is such a gift to our future selves.

Trying to satisfy all our desires is exhausting. Each one gives a moment's pleasure, but then we're off again looking for something else. There is another source of pleasure—the contentment that comes from relaxing, realizing we have enough to satisfy our needs right now. This wisdom is strengthened every time we work our way mindfully through desire.

So when we notice we're obsessing about something—the perfect birthday present, the perfect sponge cake—this is an indicator that sensual desire is at work. Congratulate yourself for having acknowledged the issue. Often that's the hardest step. Then see if you can encourage yourself to let go. Gently remind yourself how fleeting is the pleasure that comes of satisfying these desires.

If, despite all your wise words, you're still hell-bent on imagining the perfect sponge cake, then let sensual desire be the focus for mindfulness. Feel its energy, any pleasant tingles, any tensions. You really want to experience the thirst for imaginary pleasure. It is a perfectly valid form of meditation.

Suppose your mood has flipped and you're judging yourself harshly for being distracted by the silly desire for the perfect sponge cake. This is the second hindrance: aversion. Again, the hardest step is to notice what's going on. We're so busy con-

demning ourselves as bad meditators that we don't notice the fact that we're judging. But with practice, we get better at spotting this, and we say, "Oh, this is the experience of judging." And with that, judgment often stops.

This is the magic of mindfulness. Anger, judgment, and other stressful states often disappear on acknowledgement. We only cause ourselves suffering by mistake, unwittingly. As soon as we notice the suffering, we stop causing it.

At other times, however, the anger or judgment runs so deep that noticing isn't enough to bring it to a stop. In fact, it may get even stronger because now we're judging ourselves for being angry, angry at ourselves for judging, and we're going round in circles without knowing how to get out of the loop. The hindrance of aversion can be a very painful experience.

When we're assailed by aversion like this, we let the experience itself become the focus for meditation. We feel the tensions, the unpleasant sensations, how the breath is affected. We notice the stream of thoughts. And we're not trying to get rid of anger or judgment, but curious about it. We want to become intimate with the experience and learn to relax with it.

This is a challenge, as none of us likes to feel our anger, feel our judgment. But if we can persuade ourselves to just give it a try, the pain itself teaches us how to be more accepting of our human imperfections and more compassionate towards ourselves and others.

Physical pain is one very common cause of aversion. It can stir fear, anxiety, anger, or other forms of mental pain. Often we move automatically so as to relieve pain without first becoming mindful of the pain and the desire to move. Alternatively, the spiritual warrior comes crashing onto the scene, guns blazing, and we're determined to sit rock still for the full meditation hour, suppressing any feelings of anxiety or vulnerability.

If you sense this, or if the pain is too strong, then it's best to move. Move slowly and mindfully so that you can watch how the mind changes from aversion to relief as you get more comfortable. This is a valuable lesson. We realize that physical pain wasn't actually the issue. It was our mental reaction that caused the suffering.

Pain is a great teacher. So we need to encourage ourselves to sit with it, feel it, learn from it. But we also need to take care of the body, respect our limits, and learn from those magic moments as we move to relieve the pain.

The third hindrance is sloth and torpor. We keep nodding off. And again, the hardest first step is to recognize what's going on. We can get so overpowered by sleepiness, so mentally dull, that we can't even summon the energy to say, "This is sleepiness, dullness, lethargy."

Like all the hindrances, we want to experience this one, feel it, learn from it. So sit up straight, drag that head up into the air. Sometimes opening the eyes helps, letting in the light. Joseph Goldstein describes imagining his eyelids being held open by toothpicks. Though the waves of sleepiness came and went, they couldn't quite overpower him because his eyes were being held open by toothpicks.

If that doesn't work and you're still nodding off, try standing. The Buddha also recommends mental stimulation. For example, you could repeat the Four Noble Truths. Think about what they mean. It's one time in meditation where thinking is encouraged, but only until you've woken up the mind. Then it's bye-bye intellect, hello sensations and feelings again.

Once we've aroused ourselves enough to be mindful, our aim is to investigate the experience. Feel the dullness in the mind, sensations in the body. Usually there are pleasant feelings drawing us into a doze as well as unpleasant ones associated with our wish to stay awake. It's a rich mixture.

I remember going through a lot of sleepiness on a retreat until I suddenly realised I was waiting for the sleepiness to pass so that I could then meditate. This was a big discovery for me, as I could then recognise that same waiting mind state in many situations. When I was bored at a committee meeting, for example, each time I noticed the waiting state, I would grow more alert and be able to participate. This helped me overcome habits of laziness and passivity and become more active and engaged in life.

The next hindrance, restlessness, is sometimes felt in the body. We keep moving around, trying to get comfortable. Or it can be felt in the mind, as we flit off into one worry after another. Again, the major challenge is to take that little step back, recognise what's happening, and say to ourselves, "Okay, this is the experience of restlessness. What can I learn from this?"

That simple acknowledgement is sometimes all that's needed. A moment ago we were fidgeting and worrying, not knowing what the matter was. But now that we've recognised the problem and named it, our troubles are over. Such a relief when this happens. It really builds our faith in the practice.

Sometimes it doesn't resolve so easily. We know we're restless and worrying, but we're still restless and worried. In this case, let restlessness itself become the focus for meditation. Feel the aversion, the desire to move, to think. You want to get to know the raw experience. Allow it to express itself. Watched mindfully, restlessness eventually burns out.

But sometimes we can't manage to be mindful. Restlessness is too strong and keeps sweeping us away into worrying and fidgeting. In this case, it can be good to open the eyes, look at something calming like a plant or the sky. This gives a broader perspective, and the worries and fidgets won't so easily overwhelm us. We'll be aware of them.

I was anxious, restless, and worried for weeks after major surgery to remove my voice box. Luckily, my hospital bed was by a window, and during the daytime my eyes were glued to a big tree in the lawn outside. My body and mind were exploding with restless energy, but it seemed as though the tree could soak up all the impact. During sleepless nights, the clouds in the sky did the same job. Sounds could also soak up my restless energy. I always preferred it when the world was busy.

Although it was a very unpleasant few weeks, it opened my eyes to the peace on offer from what I had often ignored: trees, clouds, background sounds. I began to intuit a vast ocean of peace cradling my restless mind. This was a beautiful discovery, a great compensation for the loss of my voice box.

Learning to bear with restlessness is a wonderful gift. When it gets overwhelming, take whatever support you can from the outside world. A calming focus for the eyes. Background sounds for the ears. The sense of touch can also be very soothing—I spent a lot of time fingering the bedsheets just to feel their texture. And sometimes walking can help. Not the very slow Mahasi pace, but a gentle meander. We're not trying to get rid of restlessness, but supporting ourselves as we feel its energies in moment-to-moment mindfulness.

The final hindrance is doubt. We need to differentiate here between honest doubt and skeptical doubt. If you have never tried watching anger, you might doubt whether this could possibly be beneficial. This is honest doubt.

We genuinely don't know the answer. Skeptical doubt is where we refuse to consider watching anger because we're not sure whether this could be beneficial. Skeptical doubt prevents learning. We're unwilling to take risks, unwilling to experiment, to find out for ourselves what is false and what is true.

For many of us, doubt takes the form of self-doubt. We agree that the teachings are useful but are convinced we couldn't possibly do the practice. If this gets the upper hand, it becomes paralysing. We can't try out anything new, can't commit, can't take on responsibilities.

Once again, the major step is to recognise what's happening. Instead of believing the thought that says, "I can't possibly meditate. I couldn't ever have any insight. I shouldn't have come on retreat. I might as well go home now"—we pause for a moment and acknowledge this is the experience of skeptical doubt. This gives us some perspective. We can reason with ourselves, encourage ourselves. Is this part of a larger pattern in life? Doubting we can succeed at anything? Can we use the retreat situation as a golden opportunity to learn to work with this hindrance?

We might still feel full of doubt, but so long as we stick with the retreat and do the practice, doubt has been undermined and self-confidence has been strengthened. That's not a bad exchange.

Every hindrance cultivates the opposite virtue as we work through them mindfully. Working with sensual desire cultivates generosity and contentment. Anger transforms to goodwill. Mindful observance of sloth and torpor cultivates energy and resolve. Working with restlessness brings forth tranquility, and doubt transforms to confidence and trust.

This transformation comes about because we're learning to feel our feelings without believing their usual message. The feeling of doubt, in my experience, is most intense in my face, where the skin seems to shrink back towards my skull, prompting thoughts like, "I can't do this." But I'm doing it anyhow—taking a footstep or taking another mindful breath. The feeling of sleepiness is gorgeous, and every bit of me wants to curl up around it and forget the outside world. But for mindfulness practice, I do whatever I can to stay awake and alert.

Same with all the hindrances. We let them happen, feel the feelings, hear the thoughts without believing them.

The hindrances are like emotional storms. It would be a relief to do the bidding of each storm, to go with the flow—sleep when we're sleepy, lash out when we're angry, satiate all our desires. But the relief is short-lived, and all we've done is sow the seeds of future storms while weakening our ability to deal with them. As they say, only dead fish go with the flow.

If we go against the flow, we become mindful of the challenge. This can be uncomfortable, confusing, but it's worthy work, ennobling. We are weakening the potential for future storms, cultivating emotional resilience and spiritual strength. May we welcome each hindrance as a golden opportunity to learn the Dhamma and walk the path to the end of suffering.

To help us bear with the hindrances, it's good to remember that just being mindful of these develops skillful qualities like patience and resilience, which in turn support the strengths we need for vipassana. These are termed the factors of enlightenment.

Sounds lofty, but in fact these are very practical qualities that can be detected and developed in every meditation session. Panti Bodhidama uses the image of wild geese in flight, with mindfulness in the lead and the other qualities following. As you know, wild geese fly in a V-shaped formation, with one flank spread widely, almost abreast of the leader, pushing ahead, while the other flank rides in the slipstream, taking it easy. This is a very helpful image because three of the enlightenment factors are stimulating, keeping us alert, while three have a calming effect, making sure we don't run away with ourselves.

In the lead is mindfulness—sati in Pali, often translated as awareness. As we breathe in, we know we are breathing in. As we breathe out, we know we are breathing out. At one level, we're aware all day long, hearing sounds, seeing what's in front of our eyes, and so on. But we're not usually aware of being aware. It's this level of awareness that we're cultivating in vipassana, termed samma sati, right awareness. We hear a sound and we know we are hearing. Simple as that.

And yet we very easily forget all about this simple and natural ability to know experience as it happens. We get too busy doing this and that to even notice that life is happening now—not in the future with our great plans, but now. This sound, this footstep, this breath.

These fleeting experiences can seem irrelevant. We assume we should be doing something, achieving something. It's very hard for us to believe that not doing is also worthwhile. It's only through mindfulness practice that we see how any doing, any judging, interfering, any attempt to achieve adds tension and stress to present experience. And thus, mindfulness trains us to relax, become content with being rather than doing.

Within that magic combination of alert relaxation, we sense our minds opening, some vital energy stirring, some potential within us becoming conscious. This is satipañña, our intuitive intelligence, which is waking up and looking for the path to full awakening, enlightenment.

To help us find and keep to the path, we have all the supporting factors for mindfulness. The first of the slipstream is called samādhi in Pali, the ability of the mind to direct and rest attention. Unfortunately, samādhi is usually translated as concentration, which suggests straining to hold attention. But think of how easily your attention is held by a good film, a story, a puzzle, a hobby. That's the flavour of concentration we are aiming for in support of mindfulness.

The word focus is also helpful. We start by focusing on the sensations of the abdomen caused by breathing. If a sound grabs attention, we change focus and attend to the pitch and rhythm of the sound as we note hearing, hearing. If we find ourselves getting bored, restless, fed up, we broaden the focus to acknowledge that sense of restlessness or boredom. And to our surprise, perhaps, we might then notice the sensations at the abdomen coming into focus again, rising and falling.

The concentration we develop in Vipassana keeps shifting its focus so that attention lands wherever it is naturally called. Concentration has a calming effect because it gathers our mental energies and trains them in one direction.

Suppose we're lost in a foreign city. A thousand thoughts clamour for attention. Will I ask someone the way? Should I try that street? Should I find a police station? While the mind spins around like this, it grows more and more agitated. To calm ourselves, we choose to act on one and do that mindfully. It hardly matters which we choose. The important thing is to give the mind a focus for mindfulness. This will have an immediately calming effect.

It's the same in meditation when any of the hindrances show up. The mind spins around trying to think our way out of the difficulty, but only grows more and more agitated. If instead we focus attention somewhere—the breath, the footsteps, the emotions underlying our disturbance—a degree of calm follows and we can bear with the disturbance more easily, learn a useful Dhamma lesson from the experience.

The calming effect of concentration is balanced by the stimulating effect of energy, the leading factor in the wide flank of our wild geese formation. We have the physical energy of the posture. Experiment for yourself. Feel how much more alert you are when you sit up straight and how this dulls down as you let yourself slump. Standing is even more energising when we need an extra shot during bouts of sloth and torpor.

There is also the energy that comes from resolution. Again, experiment. See how alert and determined you feel when you make a firm resolution to be mindful. Bhante Bodhidhamma recommends St. Augustine's approach, using the phrases "I can, I ought, I want, I will" to open four avenues for the energy of resolve to flow. Try saying: I can be mindful. I ought to be mindful. I want to be mindful. I will be mindful. Repeat these to make their meaning sink deep. Although attention will still wander, you'll find it easier to rein it back in, gather it around the breath or footstep or whatever aspect of present experience is calling attention.

Resolve itself can be strengthened by reminding ourselves of some broad aim for the practice. Although we let go of aims as we relax into present experience, we can remember them when we need to summon more energy to deepen our resolve. For example, bring to mind whatever inspired you to learn to practice in the first place. Maybe it was a book you read, a teaching you heard, a meeting with someone who radiated wisdom or compassion. Maybe it was an experience that gave you a glimpse of your spiritual potential. Having brought your inspiration, the goal for your practice, to mind, you might find more meaning and depth in the resolutions. I can, I ought, I want, I will. Then let go, relax. Trust that those intentions will support your ongoing practice as you attend to the sensations of breathing.

Thus our first pair of supports for mindfulness are concentration, calming us by gathering and directing attention, and energy, prodding us to wakefulness.

The second of the slipstream factors is equanimity. This is an evenly balanced state of mind—not disturbed by unpleasantness, not enchanted and enslaved by pleasure.

When something very enticing happens—the sound of your name being called by a friend, the taste of chocolate—we usually react automatically, looking around eagerly for our friend, anticipating a pleasant chat, devouring the chocolate. We're so caught up in our reaction that we hardly even register the initial moment of pleasure. If equanimity were established, we would feel the pleasure of the call, the taste, but not get excited. We would enjoy and appreciate the situation while knowing it as fleeting and unstable, not something to invest our hopes in. We might still look around gladly for our friend, but not be dismayed or disgruntled if they're already disappearing, waving goodbye.

Equanimity develops as we encounter dukkha mindfully. Seeing how fleeting and unreliable pleasure is, we learn not to get so excited. Seeing that pain is impermanent, we grow confident that we can bear with dukkha. The mind grows less reactive, steadi-

er, better at seeing the wider picture, more willing and able to bear the ups and downs of life. Equanimity is hard-earned, but worth every tear we shed, every gnashing of teeth needed for its cultivation.

Equanimity is balanced by investigation of Dhamma, the second of the supporting factors on the wide flank. While equanimity persuades us to step back and see the larger picture, investigation requires us to cozy up to whatever calls attention.

Say we're doing walking meditation. Investigation prompts the question: what is it I'm really experiencing? The question draws attention close to the basic sensory data. We feel how the foot peels off the floor, moves through the air, touches down again. Thinking can be temporarily suspended. But whenever it sneaks in to trap us in stories, plans, and musings, we lose contact with the movements of the feet.

Slowly it dawns on us that there's no room for my plans, my dreams—no room for anything I normally think of as I and me and mine—in that strangely familiar, fluid level of reality. There is only the awareness of the feet walking. A pleasant experience, but without room for the endlessly enchanting story of me.

It's the mental factor of investigation that has led us to this strange and unsettling conclusion. We've brought our attention to the feet as they walk and discovered the Dhamma—the truths that the Buddha claims will set us free from delusion, free from suffering.

Investigation is based on curiosity. We want to know what's true. Without curiosity, meditation can help us relax, be happy, take it easy, stop trying to achieve anything. While this is indeed a welcome and healthy contrast to the busyness of modern life, it's not leading us to full awakening. It's only as we focus on detail that we start to see anicca, dukkha, anattā—how sensations and feelings keep changing whether we like it or not, and how unsatisfactory that is for our usual grasping sense of self. The up-close, microscopic view challenges our fuzzy view of the world.

Any form of Dhamma study sharpens the factor of investigation. Listening to Dhamma talks, taking part in discussions, reading scriptures and Dhamma books—all these stir curiosity, stimulate us to discover whether our own experience corresponds to that described in the talks, the books, the scriptures.

If the moment you start meditating your mind settles into a blank daze and all your enthusiasm for Dhamma study goes out the window, see if the noting word "learning, learning" brings back that sense of curiosity. It helps if you can think back to happy learning situations in life. Did you enjoy learning how to ride a bike? Bake a cake? Learning is a challenge, yes, but how else are we going to grow any way wiser?

For many of us, the notion of learning the truth about life, the universe, and everything is so exciting that we immediately get lost in our speculations about what Nibbāna is and isn't. Whenever this happens, we have to let go of heady excitement, bring ourselves back down to earth as gently as we can, so that this breath, this footstep can do their job of teaching us the Dhamma.

To help us calm down, we have the final factor on the slipstream of mindfulness: tranquility. This is the felt peace of a mind and heart at rest. It's a contentment with present experience—just the feeling of the foot lifting off the ground, perhaps. It's hard to believe we can be content with so little, but we can. The advertising industry would collapse if we could all detect this potential.

Whatever helps us feel relaxed and at ease cultivates tranquility. One way to do this is by auto-suggestion. We lay off investigation for a while and instead use the noting words "calming, calming." The idea of the breath as a gentle wave can help, as if we're in a hammock or a boat at harbour, being rocked by rhythmic waves of breathing.

Body scans can also be calming, especially if we focus on the limbs and bring attention downward. As you are breathing out, let attention flow down from left shoulder to left hand. Feel the hand resting on the lap until, at the next out-breath, you run attention from right shoulder to right hand. Keep scanning down the limbs till you feel the mind settling, growing tranquil.

One mistake that's easy to make is to expect tranquility to mean perfect, deep peace and to disdain anything less. That's a bit like expecting to win Wimbledon when we first take up a tennis racket. We need to remember we're practicing, training, and that any move in the right direction needs to be noticed and encouraged. Look out for any pleasant, relaxing feelings in meditation. Appreciate them. Make much of them.

Another danger, of course, is that we curl up around the pleasant feeling of tranquility and get dozy, or allow a lovely trance to take over, where we can fool ourselves that we're totally enlightened and don't need to do any more work. This is why tranquility needs the balance of joy, the final factor on the wide flank of our wild geese formation, pushing us onward.

Joy in Vipassana can be understood as enthusiasm for practice. We want to continue being present, being aware, learning the Dhamma. Like tranquility, joy has a pleasant feeling, but it carries more energy. It naturally follows from investigation of Dhamma. Investigation uses the mind's ability to solve a puzzle, to sort out this from that. Joy is the feel-good that comes when we're engaged and interested in what we're doing.

The joy of Vipassana is subtle, and we might even believe meditation to be a flat, joyless affair. But it can be instructive to ask yourself: Is there anything holding me to meditating a moment longer? If you can relax enough to find the answer, you will get a taste of Vipassana joy—the joy of interest, of curiosity. In this case, we're interested in finding out what's holding us to meditate. But any question asked mindfully will engage attention and cultivate this joy. This joy of engaged interest is easily overlooked. Taking the time to notice and appreciate the experience is like cultivating a new pathway for the energy of life to flow again. The more we appreciate it, the more often our psychophysical energies will use this pathway in future.

Another reason we fail to detect joy in meditation is because we tend to be overachievers. We want to be enlightened now rather than crawling slowly through the labyrinth of delusions. This is why tranquility makes such a good partner for joy in this final pair of our wild geese formation. Tranquility helps us relax enough to notice the joy of engaging with this puzzle we call the Dhamma.

Another error is to cling to preconceived notions. We've heard of meditative joy as gorgeous tingly feelings all over the body, as if we're being massaged by an ocean of butterflies. And so we expect total over-the-moon rapture and disregard anything less. We have to be patient, realistic, remember that we're learning to enjoy meditation, and that again, each small move in that direction is to be welcomed.

To recap: the factors of enlightenment can be imagined as a flock of wild geese soaring high in the sky in their classic V-shaped formation. In the lead is mindfulness. Breathing in, we know we are breathing in. Simple as that. On the wide flank, prodding us onward, are energy, investigation of Dhamma, and the joy of being engaged in an activity so interesting and worthwhile. In the slipstream, calming us down, we have concentration and equanimity. And lastly, taking it very easy in this slow, slow slippage towards liberation, comes tranquility—the peace of a still, untroubled mind.

In the Theravada scriptures, the Buddha says we must develop and pursue these seven factors. In a translation of a related Tibetan scripture by Anālayo, the words are "cultivate and make much of," which I like. We are to care for, appreciate, celebrate, and make much of these seven factors. In turn, they lead to our long-lasting happiness and well-being.

I remember seeing a documentary about a nomadic tribe in Nepal. Although their journey was challenging, hazardous, and for some proved fatal, the sentiment that inspired the trek was: it's the journey that counts, not the destination. This is the attitude we need so as to cultivate the factors of enlightenment.

The process can also be likened to training a puppy dog. The trick is to reward good behavior, ignore the bad. So too in Vipassana. We don't make any big deal out of lapses in attention when the mind wanders. We just get straight back to the job. On the other hand, we look out for, appreciate, and pat ourselves on the back for any traces of tranquility, joy, or any other factors of enlightenment. It's okay to celebrate our successes. In fact, it's more than okay. It's necessary.

May we soar through wide open skies to our true home—the peace and joy of liberation.

CHAPTER 10

1st, 2nd & 3rd Noble Truths: Dukkha, its Cause & Cessation

Noirin Sheahan · 37 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Noirin Sheahan provides an accessible yet thorough exploration of the Four Noble Truths, with particular emphasis on the first three. She begins by establishing that these truths must be learned through direct experience rather than intellectual understanding alone—the Buddha's use of the word 'this' pointing to something immediately felt and known. The talk examines dukkha in its full range, from the suffering inherent in birth and death to the subtler dissatisfaction found in beginnings and endings of everyday experiences.*
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> *Sheahan illuminates the Buddha's teaching that 'the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha,' explaining how we mistakenly identify with body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness as our essential self. This teaching on anattā (not-self) reveals that clinging to any identity—whether positive or negative—inevitably leads to suffering because all such identities are inconstant and unreliable. The second Noble Truth identifies taṇhā (desire or craving) as the cause of suffering, while the third truth points to the cessation of suffering when desire fades.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing peace in everyday life, encouraging practitioners to notice absences—parts of the body not in pain, moments free from anger or craving, the space between objects. Drawing on the Mettā Sutta and the metaphor of the Eightfold Path as a journey from the jungle of ignorance toward liberation, Sheahan presents the Buddha's teaching as a gradual path of disentanglement, where wisdom, sīla (ethical conduct), and meditation work together to uproot the causes of suffering.*

Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha decided to teach others how to follow his lead. He first sought out his earlier spiritual companions and told them of four observations that had led him to liberation. These later became known as the Four Noble Truths and are the cornerstone for all schools of Buddhism.

All truths concern dukkha, a Pali word usually translated as suffering, or sometimes as stress, distress, or unsatisfactoriness. Dukkha spans the full range of negativity we experience, from minor irritations to rage, terror, and despair.

The Buddha told his companions that liberation involved seeing for himself: this is suffering; this is the cause of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The word "this" refers to something close at hand. It's not an abstract idea to think about—it's something we can see or feel or experience here and now. This cup, this foot, this thought. We learn the Four Noble Truths from direct experience. We feel how suffering feels, discover what causes it, realize that suffering can stop, and let that guide us along the path that reduces suffering and brings it eventually to a complete end.

As we learn the Four Noble Truths, we move from delusion to an understanding of what causes suffering and what makes us happy. We often think of understanding as a purely intellectual, rational process. We think we should only have to learn the Dhamma once and then have this as a skill we can call upon any time, in the same way as we learned how to drive or fix a puncture. But the understanding we need for liberation is not purely cognitive. We have to take the Dhamma fully to heart. Until we're fully liberated, we'll be continually relearning the Four Noble Truths, feeling the dukkha in experience, searching for the cause.

The First Noble Truth is basically the Buddha's definition of dukkha: Birth is dukkha. Old age and death are dukkha. Sorrow, lamentations, and despair are dukkha. Being connected to what one dislikes is dukkha. Being separated from what one likes is dukkha. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. In short, the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha.

Birth is dukkha. We usually think of birth as joyous, but in fact physical birth is a painful and perilous process for mother and baby. It's when both are pronounced safe and well that the joy arises. Before that, it's touch and go between hope and fear.

We also get a flavour of this when we look closely at the start of any process—a new job, for example. Again, we think of it as good news, something to celebrate, but there is that awkward first day in the office: not knowing anyone or where things are kept or how not to be a nuisance, having to learn new procedures, watching our P's and Q's, taking care to make a good impression. It's not something we would want to do every day of our lives. It would be too stressful.

Now, some of us love new beginnings. There's a sense of potential. Anything could happen. If we're the optimistic type, we project all kinds of wonders into whatever it is—a new job, a new partner, the start of a holiday, the first few hours of a retreat. Everything is going to be perfect. We'll be enlightened in no time. This kind of over-the-top optimism is one manifestation of delusion. The truth is that we don't know what's

going to happen, whether things will turn out well or not. And that experience of not knowing is so uncomfortable for us that we concoct lovely fantasies rather than feel the experience.

But after a year, or maybe only a week, of the new job or new partner—perhaps only a day or two into the holiday or retreat—we realise that it's not all a bed of roses, that the reality doesn't match up to the fantasies. And if things do turn out well and our expectations are all met or even exceeded, there will be a time when it all comes asunder. We'll someday have to retire from the job. The holiday will come to an end, as will the retreat. Our partner will die, or else we will die and leave it all behind: the job, the holiday, the loving relationships, all our retreats. Everything we know ends at death.

Death is the second example of dukkha which the Buddha gives. Our own physical death is indeed the big one. Unless we can say goodbye to all we hold dear, death will surely be a time of anguish. We can practice our goodbyes by paying attention to the ending of any activity or event. These can all be seen as mini-deaths.

We often make light of these endings by thinking ahead to what's to come, but that won't be an option at our real death, so we might as well pause at endings now, acknowledge that the holiday or the party or some particular task is coming to an end. There may be relief, a sense of something accomplished, a job well done. Such sentiment is to be treasured. If we can feel the same way at our own death, it will be a great gift.

We might also detect grief, knowing that something we were enjoying is now stopping. There can be a surprising amount of grief, even at the close of relatively trivial events, when we pay close attention.

On retreat at Gaia House one time, I was following the usual Mahasi practice of a single biscuit in the evening, but all the while envying the other retreatants their bowls of soup. I looked forward so much to the final day when I could have that evening treat. Sure enough, the day came and the soup was delicious. I savoured every mouthful until I noticed that the bowl was no longer even half full. A big wave of misery emerged and got stuck in my throat. It was my first real recognition of the truth that all pleasures come to an end. I got the Buddha's full whammy of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. I couldn't even finish my treasured bowl of soup, but went to my room and howled in misery.

Having realised the emotional impact of delusive over-expectations, I never built such high expectations out of sense pleasures again. This is the benefit of paying attention to endings. We move from delusion to wisdom, and instead of being continually

disappointed by the world, by other people, we grow to accept that neither the world nor other people can bring us lasting happiness. We grow more forgiving of our own and others' limitations, more appreciative of whatever does happen to go right.

The Buddha summarizes dukkha by saying the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha. These aggregates of clinging are what we mistakenly assume to be our true selves—that essential element of me which has been with me since birth and will remain with me to death and perhaps hereafter. In Christianity, we would call this our soul.

The Buddha searched ardently for his essence and on the way discovered a series of false identities which ensnared him in dukkha. He used this discovery as the basis for his teaching on anatta, or not-self. To find our true essence, we must first see through all the false identities we assume.

At times we identify with the body, feeling proud of our strength or beauty, ashamed of our pimples and wrinkles. This is dukkha. The Buddha points out that such inconstancy is not worthy of being thought of as an essential part of our identity. At other times, we identify with our feelings, get deeply wounded when these are hurt—yet more dukkha. Sometimes we identify with perceptions, swear that the earth was created in seven days, are ready to die for our belief.

Then again, we can identify with character traits. Perhaps we assume kindness or generosity are essential components of our true self. But this means we have to suppress any suggestions of unkindness or meanness, pretend they aren't happening. More harmfully, we can identify with negative characteristics like self-doubt, thinking "I'm useless, I always make a mess of things." Though the identity is painful, it's also comforting, as we never get disappointed because we never expect much of ourselves.

The final aggregate is consciousness, where we assume our essence as the knowing of all our experience, thinking "I am the one who sees and hears and smells and tastes and thinks and experiences the joys and pains of life." The Buddha examined all of these areas but found all such identities to be inconstant, unreliable. Traits like generosity arose depending on conditions, feelings changed when circumstances changed, as did perceptions. None of these provided a stable foundation upon which he could declare, "This is my true self."

He also found that there was great pain, dukkha, in discovering each identity to be false. We cling vainly to our delusions, saying "I am feeling miserable" or "I am useless," refusing to believe that these experiences come and go depending on conditions.

The Buddha realised that peace came only when he relaxed all attempts to cling, when he let go of any attempt to define himself. His teaching on anatta asks us to recognize that clinging to identity causes suffering, prevents us adapting to circumstances, flowing with life's vicissitudes. Note that the Buddha never denies that we have a self, an ultimate identity. He just says it cannot be defined or captured in any way that satisfies our craving for sense pleasure, our craving to be someone, or our craving to escape it all and be nobody. Any identity we find is temporary. It will eventually break up.

But we can use every temporary identity wisely. He repeatedly asks us to look after our long-term happiness by practicing the Dhamma. We can have and encourage a healthy sense of self, so long as we know this as a friend on the path, a temporary gift, not our ultimate essence.

In summary then, the first noble truth describes dukkha and tells us that we must fully understand it. We can look for dukkha in any new beginning and in every ending—in parting, in saying goodbye, when we're in sorrow, pain or despair. We can turn towards these as opportunities to learn more about dukkha and its causes.

Similarly, when we're getting over-identified with a role or job, believing "this is me" or "this is definitely not me"—these are again perfect opportunities to study dukkha.

The second truth the Buddha wants us to learn is what causes dukkha. We think that the problem lies with the world, or other people, or the laws of nature. But the Buddha discovered that the cause was within ourselves. Desire—*taṇhā* in Pali—caused him to suffer. *Taṇhā* includes what we usually call aversion: the desire to be rid of something.

We suffer because we want more of the nice stuff—cakes and ale and rock and roll, praise, adulation, fame, beauty, health, youth. And when life gives us instead dry bread and blame and loneliness and old age with its wrinkles and decrepitude, we don't know how to cope.

The Buddha's wonderful discovery was that when he stopped wanting things to be anything other than the way they were, suffering also stopped. Even physical pain did not have to cause suffering. Once he accepted the pain, stopped making it a problem, suffering stopped. He was at peace.

But as we all know, we can't command ourselves to accept pain or whatever other dukkha life is presenting. That would be to suppress dukkha, not to uproot it. Luckily, we have the capacity to learn that desire causes suffering. As that understanding sinks deeper, desire loses its grip.

On the way, however, we have to learn to work skillfully with the many deluded desires that arise every day. For this, we have mindfulness. We watch ourselves longing vainly for things to be different. We're not suppressing desire—we're using the experience to learn the second noble truth. Is desire really the cause of suffering? With this curiosity in mind, desire loses some of its edge.

Say it was the desire for fame. We've been looking at Celebrity MasterChef and envying the winner, wanting everyone drooling over our crème caramel. If we turn away from the screen and use this opportunity to study *taṇhā*, we're halfway there. Desire might fade as soon as we spot it, and we realise how silly it was to be thinking that way.

Other desires run too deep to stop on recognition. In that case, we feel the stresses and strains of longing. Watched mindfully, the desire at first grows very strong, but eventually burns out. The energy of desire usually drives thought and fantasies, which in turn feed that very desire. But now all that energy is contained by mindfulness. It's as if we've put ourselves into a pressure cooker. For a while, the energy might tense our jaws, our throat, our chest. We might be panting with unfulfilled desire. But after a while, desire exhausts itself and fades away.

If we're lucky, we sense a moment of peace as desire fades. The absence of desire is a very beautiful experience, which the Buddha recognized as his third noble truth: the end of suffering.

We're so lucky that the Buddha did the hard work of pinpointing this, because otherwise few of us would take any notice of that moment of peace as desire fades. Unless we examine it, bring deliberate attention to it, peace is easily overlooked. It doesn't call attention. It's not a loud experience of joyous bliss that shouts, "This is wonderful!" It's simply the absence of any trouble.

Our whole psychology and physiology is designed to be on alert for trouble and for enticement. It's part of our animal nature. We need to survive, so we have to be on the lookout for danger and also for food, shelter, our pals, and whatever will help us survive. We're not biologically designed to make a big thing out of peace.

That's why it's so easy for us to miss that brief moment when desire fades, to instead notice the next thing that grabs our attention, then have a new desire form around that. To sensitise ourselves to the third noble truth, we need to cultivate a taste for peace. Instead of booking one party after another, we spend some time in quietness—meditating perhaps, or walking in nature, sitting by the fire, listening to birdsong.

This might not always feel so peaceful. We may have to combat our cultural conditioning to be always busy, always achieving something. So we might feel anxious or guilty sitting down doing nothing for an evening. Peace is actually not that easy to tolerate for long. The self, the "me" I presume myself to be, needs a role, a purpose. It wants to be getting something or getting somewhere.

overcoming problems or doing good, affecting the world in some way. In perfect peace, there is nothing for me to do, no problems to solve. Most of us simply doze off after a minute or two, or else we grow restless, start to create problems just so we can solve them.

What we're seeing here is the dukkha of identification. We want to be someone. We want definition. The self is born from reactivity—reacting against what we dislike, busily trying to get rid of it, reacting with desire for what we like, busy planning how to prolong the pleasure, get more of it, be someone important.

To practice with the third noble truth, we can use any moments of peace wisely. Let them be felt, noticed. Notice the tendency to burst out of it with some new identity and just keep relaxing all of that, telling ourselves it's fine to be redundant, to take it easy, have no role to play in life. Quite a practice.

Another way we can practice with the third truth is to start appreciating absences. We usually associate absence with grief, but rarely acknowledge that many absences are very beautiful. We easily notice pain, but we can also start to look out for parts of the body that are not in pain. The Buddha also advises us to notice when we're not angry, for example, not feeling greedy. When we're feeling uptight and frustrated, we can reflect that dullness and lethargy are absent. We can notice when others aren't irritating us or demanding anything.

A retreat is an especially rich time for this. I used to think of my mother as very demanding, always asking me for something or other. It was quite an eye-opener to reflect that while I was on retreat, she was looking after herself, not putting me under any pressure. At first, I actually resisted the thought. My locked-in image of her as demanding was so strong it could not be budged. But gradually, I learned to acknowledge and be grateful for the fact that she was looking after herself quite well while I was away. I began to see her more realistically, admire and respect her strength of character. Our relationship improved, and I'm very thankful that in her last years, when she was more dependent on me, I didn't see this as a burden. Much of the time it was so easy and natural, I hardly thought about it at all. Something I had dreaded throughout much of my adult life turned out to be no problem and, on the contrary, a source of quiet joy.

If there is someone in your life who you see as oppressive in some way, it might really pay off to reflect that while you're here on retreat, they aren't oppressing you.

We can also notice physical absences. When an ugly shed was demolished in this garden, the Dhamma teacher Stephen Batchelor spent days looking out the window, noticing the absence of the shed. In a similar way, we can notice that wherever we walk, there is space letting us pass through. We can look for the gaps between houses in the city, see the sky beyond.

As we attune to space and absences and quiet, peaceful moments when life isn't troubling us, we deepen our understanding of the third noble truth, which the Buddha usually describes very simply as the end of suffering. To give a bit more flavour, we have these analogies from the monk Nagasena:

Just as space is not produced, does not age, does not suffer death, cannot be carried away by thieves, rests on nothing, is the pathway of birds, presents no obstacles, is endless—so also nibbāna is not produced, does not age, does not suffer, cannot be carried away by thieves, rests on nothing, is the pathway of the noble, presents no obstacles, is endless.

The great ocean is all in blossom with the flowers of waves, mighty, various, unnumbered. Precisely so, nibbāna is all in blossom with the flowers of purity, knowledge and deliverance, mighty, various and unnumbered.

Even a brief taste of the peace that comes as desire fades will stir the skilful desire to find our way to nibbāna, which is exactly the concern of the fourth noble truth, known also as the noble eightfold path.

I had been meditating for a while before it eventually sank in that meditation wasn't the whole of the spiritual life, that the eightfold path described many other areas of life that counted too. That gave me great joy and continues to do so. If I'm feeling glum and demotivated about work, I can reflect that my work is part of right livelihood, one of the strands of the eightfold path. That lifts my spirits, helps me to take on the work more willingly. Everything can be lifted from the dull and ordinary when we reflect that this is also leading towards liberation.

The path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality, and the cultivation of our mind and heart through meditation. Each of the eight strands is described as "right"—right understanding, right attitude, and so on. This can make the path seem like a set of rigid rules to follow. "Disentangled" is perhaps a better translation. It's a good description of what happens as we follow the path. We sense our thought processes straightening out, our emotional life disentangling. We become more straightforward in our deal-

ings with others. In meditation, we can often feel ourselves getting into knots of tension as the hindrances show up, and then feel the relief as those knots loosen in the light of awareness.

Because "disentangled" is a bit of a mouthful, I'll follow the convention of calling each step "right this" or "right that." But bear in mind the gentler and more evocative sense that we disentangle ourselves from the binds of dukkha as we develop our path.

The first section is right understanding. We suffer because of not understanding what causes suffering and what prevents it. Reflecting on the four noble truths starts us on the journey from delusion to wisdom. Experiencing these truths in moment-to-moment awareness lets them sink in deeply so that we take the Dhamma to heart.

This naturally changes our attitude, so that we become more kindly, generous, and compassionate. This is what we mean by right attitude, the second strand of the Eightfold Path.

We can also cultivate right attitude by practicing mettā meditation. Mettā is usually translated as goodwill or loving-kindness. We wish ourselves and others to be well and happy. This undermines habits like anger. In our gardening analogy, you could say it covers over the weeds, preventing them from getting any sunlight. They can't thrive and sow more seeds.

When we feel our own pain or see that someone else is in physical or mental pain, the friendly attitude of mettā takes on the hue of compassion. We're sensitive to the suffering, careful not to make it any worse, ready to do whatever needs to be done to make things easier. At heart, we wish ourselves and others to be free from suffering.

When something welcome happens, mettā shades into muditā, often translated as appreciative joy. We are gladdened by good news. We're ready to congratulate ourselves for any achievement, no matter how small. Even getting out of bed can be an achievement some days. When we hear of another's success, we feel happy for them.

Mettā cultivates friendliness, while compassion helps us bear suffering, and muditā lets us appreciate our many blessings. All of these need the support of equanimity.

Without equanimity, mettā easily overshoots into attachment, and we become more dependent on our friends for our own sense of worth. With equanimity, we learn to accept that friends have separate lives, other responsibilities, other affections.

Without the balance of equanimity, compassion slides into pity. We see ourselves as the stronger party, caring for the weaker one. It can become an addiction—needing to be needed. Equanimity restores the balance, lets us see the strength at the core of the other's being.

Muditā easily overshoots into excitement. We celebrate madly and go to excess. When the bills come in, we're shocked. Equanimity helps us recognize joy as a temporary gift, while knowing that all earthly joys are bound to fade.

The Mettā Sutta is a beautiful description of right attitude. We chant this every morning in Pāli. Here's an English translation read by Mark Arthur, another teacher here at Satipañña:

So this is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace. Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways, peaceful and calm and wise and skillful, not proud or demanding in nature.

Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove. Wishing, in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none —the great or the mighty, medium, short, or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to be born—may all beings be at ease.

Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding.

And by not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision, being freed from all sense desires, is not born again into this world.

Right understanding and right attitude combine as wisdom, the first section of the Eightfold Path. The next section, termed sīla in Pāli, concerns the expression of wisdom in daily life. Sīla is usually translated as morality or ethics. I'm going to use the Pāli word sīla because we often associate morality with a strict, joyless approach to life.

Family photos from Victorian times illustrate this. No one smiles. The children look miserable in their heavy, awkward clothes. An austere father towers over them while his wife sits demurely at his side, laced and buttoned to within an inch of her life. Desire finds no expression in this picture of morality.

But we need to remember that desire can also be wise. The desire to be happy is perhaps our most basic drive in life. It only gets us into trouble because we don't rightly understand what allows for happiness, what causes suffering. The Buddha promises us that if we follow this path, we will be content and therefore happy.

Morality in this life is seen as a step toward happiness. *Sīla* is not an easy matter. For each of us, there will be difficult ethical questions to face at many stages in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response in complex situations, along with a stout heart to meet the challenge. We also need to be patient with our many mistakes, not torment ourselves about them. But remember, we can learn to do better.

The Buddha divides *sīla* into three sections: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Here are three areas of life where we can tailor our behavior so as to promote our own long-term happiness. Tomorrow's talk is on daily life, and as *sīla* is so relevant to this, I won't discuss it further here. Tomorrow I'll give suggestions as to how we can develop *sīla* as we go about our everyday business.

The last section of the Eightfold Path concerns the cultivation of mind and heart in meditation practice. And as we've been engaged in this all week, I'll only briefly mention it here. The Buddha describes three aspects to cultivate: right effort, mindfulness, and concentration. So here we have again the leading trio in our wild geese—mindfulness, energy, concentration.

To see their interrelation, we have the analogy of three children wanting to pick fruit from a tree. None of them is tall enough to reach the fruit, so the strongest one, right effort, bends over to let the tallest one, right concentration, stand on his back, while the steadiest of the three, right mindfulness, provides a shoulder to lean on. Supported by right effort, balanced by mindfulness, concentration can then pluck the fruit. Again, I'll say more about this and all aspects of the Eightfold Path tomorrow as we look at how we can maintain and strengthen our meditation practice in daily life.

In summary, the Four Noble Truths concern *dukkha* and how to bring it to an end. The Buddha said that his own liberation came from fully understanding *dukkha*, from seeing that desire was the cause. As he let go of desire, he realized that *dukkha* came to an end, simply stopped happening. To bring it to a permanent close, he followed the Eightfold Path.

Lost in the jungle of ignorance, we ponder the Four Noble Truths to get an inkling of what causes suffering and what relieves it. As the truth sinks in, our attitude grows friendlier. The sword of wisdom cuts through some tangles of delusion to form a clearing. *Sīla* blossoms in the form of right speech, action, and livelihood, to be rewarded by the law of karma so that we become happier. The jungle no longer seems so threatening, and we rest a while in the clearing to cultivate our mind and heart in meditation. Supported by effort, led and balanced by mindfulness, our mind focuses on the diamond and the Four Noble Truths sink in even deeper. This sharpens the sword of wisdom, which cuts through another thicket of delusion. Step by step, we form the path that leads from the jungle of ignorance to the freedom of enlightenment.

In what is termed his victory verse, the Buddha uses the analogy of a house builder to describe the delusive desire, *taṇhā*, that drives us to seek our essence within the world, to build castles in the air. The ridge pole for these castles is ignorance, our lack of understanding about *dukkha* and its cause. Here is the Buddha's victory verse:

Seeking but not finding the house builder,
I have travelled through the round of countless births.
How painful is birth over and over again.
Oh house builder, you have now been caught.
You shall not build a house again.
Your rafters have been broken,
Your ridge pole demolished.
The unconditioned consciousness has been attained
And every kind of craving has been destroyed.

I hope this overview of the Four Noble Truths has been helpful. May all beings come to the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 11

4th Noble Truth: Eightfold Path in Daily Life - read by Therese Caherty

Noirin Sheahan · 38 min

> *As a meditation retreat draws to a close, this talk by Noirin Sheahan offers comprehensive guidance on bringing practice into daily life through the Fourth Noble Truth—the Noble Eightfold Path. The teaching emphasizes that 'noble' here means ennobling, offering a framework for living a worthy life rather than rigid rules to follow dogmatically.*
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> *The talk systematically explores each strand of the path: Right View through Dhamma study, books, talks, and courses; Right Attitude through mettā practice woven throughout the day; the three aspects of sīla (morality)—right speech, action, and livelihood—examined through the lens of kamma (karma) as the law connecting our intentions to our happiness. Sheahan clarifies that kamma operates specifically in the realm of happiness and unhappiness, distinct from the laws of physics, biology, and psychology. Contemporary ethical questions around consumption, environmental impact, sexuality, and livelihood are addressed with nuance, acknowledging that much of ethical life involves choosing the lesser harm.*
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> *The final section covers meditation practice: right effort as the balance between slacking and striving; right mindfulness drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's teaching on full awareness in all activities—going forward and returning, looking ahead and away, flexing limbs, eating, and all daily functions; and right concentration (samādhi) as restful attention rather than forced focus. Throughout, the importance of saṅgha—spiritual friendship—is emphasized as essential support, culminating in the Buddha's teaching to Ānanda that good friendship is not half but the whole of spiritual life.*

As the retreat comes to an end, we naturally start to think about the bigger picture—family, friends, work and so on—and how we might bring the benefits of our retreat practice into everyday life.

To get the Buddha's advice on this, we have the fourth noble truth: the path to the end of suffering, with the injunction to follow this path for ourselves. The path itself has eight strands and is known as the Noble Eightfold Path—noble because it is ennobling and makes for a worthy life.

I'd been meditating for a few years before I really started taking this Eightfold Path to heart. Earlier I'd been so intent on learning to meditate that I didn't take much notice of anything else in Buddhism. But finally the penny dropped. I realised there was so

much more I could do, that there were lots of areas of life that could open up as part of spiritual practice. It was a great relief to realise this. I felt empowered and inspired. I hope it doesn't take any of you so long to open up to this teaching.

Each of the strands is described as "right"—right view, right attitude, and so on. This can be off-putting, as if there's no room for discussion or error. In practice, much of the path has to be discovered by trial and error, by considering, by experimenting, learning and discussing. But we're not in a sea of confusion either. We have these eight signposts to give us a sense of direction, a basis on which to learn and question and discuss.

It starts with right view, or right understanding. This sounds dogmatic, and the Buddha wasn't shy about stating his views as right, true, correct—while also saying that we have to investigate, see for ourselves whether they hold true in our own experience also. It's not a path of pure faith that we're following, but a path of wisdom.

Any form of Dhamma study will strengthen this aspect of the Eightfold Path. There are so many good books, and after the retreat we'll provide a short list of some of our favourites. Or you could sign up for a magazine like Tricycle, which gives daily Dhamma bites into your email inbox along with lots of excellent articles. Listen to Dhamma talks—there are thousands to choose from. We have many on the Satipanya website, and an excellent resource is the website Dharma Seed, which has all the Gaia House talks, as well as those from IMS and other meditation centres.

You could join a study programme. There are many online courses available, including one that I offer twice a year at Satipanya, usually lasting around six weeks and based on some aspect of the Dhamma—the four foundations of mindfulness, for example. Each week there are a set of notes with suggested exercises, and people post their observations and reflections on a forum, which gives a way to learn from one another that can often seem more believable than when it comes from a teacher.

The second strand of the path is right attitude, which means cultivating an attitude of goodwill in the forms of compassion, generosity, and kindness. For this, we have the practice of goodwill meditation: mettā. It's a good habit to finish daily meditation with about ten minutes of mettā, and to listen to a guided mettā practice regularly.

We can also get into the habit of making good wishes regularly throughout the day. For example, if you're meeting with someone, spend a moment beforehand wishing them well in your heart. I'm sure you will find the meetings far more meaningful if you do that. As you go into a meeting at work, make a good wish that this will benefit the organisation, the people you serve. As you're sitting on a bus, you can wish well to those around you.

I was on a loving-kindness retreat with Sharon Salzberg, a renowned teacher, and she advised taking walks in nature, wishing well to the trees and bushes as we pass. A lovely practice. I went through a very brief knitting craze a few years ago, and for every stitch I'd make a good wish for someone. There are no end of variations to the formal mettā practice, and it's good fun trying them out.

A word of warning, though. All the hindrances we come across in vipassanā show up just as often in mettā. Sometimes we can't stop daydreaming, planning, writing a best-seller. Other times aversion shows up—we feel resentful instead of friendly. Or we doze off, or get all fidgety and worried, or doubt this is doing any good to anyone. It's easy to compound the difficulty by assuming we must be a hard-hearted, mean-spirited person, incapable of love, totally unlovable.

Instead, we should simply acknowledge that there's a hindrance afoot, and that we need to take it easy, be mindful for a while, rather than pressing ourselves for good wishes. After a while, it may be possible to return to mettā, but at a gentler pace—maybe a good wish at every third or fourth tree, every tenth passenger on the bus.

Mettā can be incredibly effective at repairing a bad relationship. I got off to a bad start with one particular colleague and dreaded every encounter. A friend reminded me to bring him to mind and say, "May you be well," as I went about my other tasks.

It might have helped that he went on a fortnight's holiday just as I started this practice. But when he came back, I found myself relating to him quite easily. In fact, we became friends as well as enjoying an easy and productive working relationship.

This strand of the Eightfold Path—Right Attitude—brings a great deal of happiness into life.

The next three strands of the path concern morality, *sila* in Pali, but before going through these, I want to show the role of *kamma* here, how it links morality and happiness. When we hear of someone's good fortune, we might say, "Oh, that's your good *kamma*," and we might think along the same lines for misfortune. But this is a mistake.

The Buddha said that *kamma* was one of five laws operating in the universe. As well as the law of *kamma*, we have the laws of the physical world, biology, psychology, and finally the Dharma—the Four Noble Truths. We cannot ascribe someone's injury or handicap to bad *kamma;* it could be due to biology or physics. Nor can we ascribe their beauty or longevity to good *kamma*; these could be the biology of inheritance.

What we can ascribe to a person's previous *kamma* is their happiness or unhappiness. These operate under the law of *kamma*. When we think, speak, or act motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion, we sow *kamma* seeds which will eventually ripen to diminish our happiness. Conversely, thoughts of goodwill sow seeds of *kamma* that ripen to make us happier.

Sometimes the connection can be easily seen. For example, if we decide to give someone a present, even the thought of this makes us feel happy. Often the process isn't immediate and can be quite subtle, so it can perhaps take years of careful observation to convince ourselves of the law of *kamma*. But we can see how it happens in broad terms.

Motivated by ill will, we say something nasty. We might feel strong as a result, get our own way. So we get in the habit of nasty speech, and each callous remark confirms our position of power. But where does it lead in the longer term? Those of a kind and friendly nature avoid us or confront us openly. More fearful or conniving people, who like being on the good side of a bully, rally around—but will be delighted to stab us in the back when they get the opportunity. We don't have real friends. Deep down we know that, and so we live in a state of suppressed anxiety.

Similarly for greed: the enjoyment is temporary, while the stress of continually needing to satisfy our every need is exhausting. Overconsumption harms our bodies, and everything we consume has to be paid for, so we get stressed out with overwork. Satiating greed makes us feel needy rather than satisfied.

On the other hand, if we speak or act out of goodwill, there will be social benefits as others respond warmly to generosity and kindness. The benefits also go deep within. Each kind word helps heal our own heart. Each act of generosity counters our sense of neediness.

It is the motivation that matters for the law of *kamma*. If a doctor cares for their patients only because of the status of the job and the amount they can charge, they suffer the consequences of greed, no matter how many people they cure.

Because morality, *sila*, leads to happiness, we're not punishing ourselves by restraining our speech, actions, or sexual behaviour. We're seeing that it's in our own best interest to speak and act with consideration for others.

The Buddha divides *sila* into three sections: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.

Right Speech must be kindly, truthful, timely, and useful, as well as being said gently rather than harshly. This sounds heavy going, as though you would have to think for ten minutes before saying anything. But as mindfulness practice deepens and we become more sensitive to subtle emotions, the rules become internalised as a gut feeling —because speech that doesn't meet these criteria leaves us feeling bad.

If we tell a lie, for example, some anxiety immediately starts up because there's always a danger we'll be found out. Shouting and swearing at someone might give some satisfaction when we're angry, but we find it much harder to let go of the anger afterwards, and we'll probably come around to regretting our loss of temper. Idle gossip gives the thrill of titillation, but at our next meditation, we probably find our mind full of restless thoughts. On investigation, we see they link to regret at having spoken of someone behind their back.

That's the trouble with practising mindfulness: we just can't get away with bad behaviour anymore. It's because our nature is only at peace with itself when we're speaking and acting out of goodwill. The meanness or subtle cruelty that so easily accompanies lies or harsh speech or gossip grates against our true nature and gives us a hard time at meditation.

Speech is useful if it promotes happiness. You might wonder about small talk. How useful can it be to talk about the weather when we all know it's raining? But remember, it's the motivation that counts. Small talk promotes friendliness, helps us feel at ease. Very useful.

The main temptation towards unhelpful speech is gossip in the form of slander. Sometimes it can be difficult to draw the line between this and the genuine need to discuss a third party's behaviour.

It could be because we've been hurt by the person and need a kindly ear to help us move on. It could be because we've witnessed behaviour we judge as wrong and are troubled by this. The historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that the main purpose for language development in early humans was so that they could gossip. This gave the tribe an advantage because if one of their members was untrustworthy, the rest of the tribe needed to know, otherwise they couldn't maintain social cohesion.

If your motive is to do some good by relating a tale about a third party, then this isn't idle gossip or slander. You're protecting others from hurt or fraud. But we often have mixed motives. As well as the genuine wish to prevent harm, there could be strains of anger and vengeance mixed in with the gleeful titillation of speaking ill of someone be-

hind their back. When I sense mixed motives in this or any other aspect of sīla, I make a good wish of the form: may I do more good than harm here; may I learn from any mistake.

Ideally, we'd confront the person directly rather than tell others of their behaviour. But this may not always be practical and might do more harm than good. Timely speech is especially important when we have something difficult to say. Maybe you need to tell the person how hurt you were by something they did or said. If the other person looks exhausted or preoccupied, best hold back. It's easy for negativity to spread like a virus. It would be better to ask them to meet to discuss something sensitive, so that they would be more prepared for a genuine heart to heart.

Right action means not harming others, stealing their property, or hurting through sexuality. While most of us would not want to kill or harm others, there is often some form of exploitation involved in the ways our food, clothing, gadgets and other goods are produced. In fact, it's impossible to be totally non-harming if you look into the matter seriously. But we can minimise harm through strategies such as purchasing ethically produced goods, avoiding factory farmed produce, becoming vegetarian or vegan, or becoming active in causes that support human rights and combat exploitation and poverty.

Not stealing. Few people who come on retreat will be involved in gross theft. But are we using more than our fair share of the earth's resources? Every manufactured item, every flight, every motorised journey adds to our carbon footprint. Are these justified? Do they benefit me? Do they benefit others? A challenging question for most of us, one we need to revisit regularly.

And then there's the thorny question of sexual behaviour. Sexual energy is powerful and can forge and maintain strong relationships, which might in turn sustain a family, a community. The benefits can spread far afield. On the flip side, infidelity can destroy all that, cause enormous hurt.

And what of abortion? How can we gauge the potential for suffering here? In Buddhist understanding, the fetus becomes conscious at the moment of conception, leaving no doubt that abortion involves suffering from the fetus's point of view. But what suffering would be inflicted on a pregnant woman without the support and resources needed to bring a child into the world? No easy answers there.

And we have the horrors of childhood sexual abuse and vulnerable people being manipulated into giving sexual favours or forced into prostitution. Sexuality has the potential to enhance life, to bring great joy, to underpin social cohesion, but it can also cause

enormous suffering. There will be big questions for many of us at some stage in life—which relationship to pursue, which to forego—but also more subtle questions such as: am I being friendly here, or am I flirting? In a monastic setting, lay people are asked to dress modestly and not to wear makeup as a way of waking us up to the potential for manipulating others by accentuating our sexual allure.

The final strand of morality is right livelihood. The Buddha considered it wrong to make a living by dealing with weapons, poisons, slavery, intoxicants, and meat. Although few poisons are sold legally nowadays, there is the tricky area of pest control. If your work involves these, see whether you could stock a compassionate alternative, like traps that do not kill the animal.

Butchery obviously involves great suffering for animals, and there can be long, frightening journeys before slaughter. To be directly involved in this must be a challenge to a sensitive heart and could foster indifference, even cruelty. Raising animals for slaughter is part of the same business. The Buddha's advice is to get out of this aspect of farming, and anything else to do with the meat trade, for your own spiritual welfare.

Many people are employed in the weapons industry, from soldiers on the ground to scientists in the lab. War seems horrific when seen from a distance, but can you stand by as atrocities are committed? It's a question of choosing the lesser evil. Bhante has an essay, "Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?" on the Satipañña website, where he distinguishes between force and violence. Force is the energy used to put right what is wrong. Violence is the same energy laced with anger, revenge, spite, and so on. Again, it comes back to motivation.

The injunction not to deal with intoxicants poses hard questions, as almost every shop, restaurant and hotel is expected to supply alcohol. Most of us know people who live good lives while drinking moderately. On the other hand, many road accidents are alcohol-related, as well as domestic and street violence and sexual abuse.

If we can change job, then it's best to do this. But that might bring its own problems if we let our family down or slide into unemployment and poverty. Much of the hard work with right livelihood is to decide which of our various options implies the lesser harm.

For each of us, there will be difficult ethical questions to face at some stage in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response and a stout heart to meet the challenge. We also need to be patient with our many mistakes, not torment ourselves about them, but remember we can learn to do better.

The last section of the Eightfold Path concerns meditation practice. This also has three strands: right effort, mindfulness and concentration.

Every step we've looked at so far requires effort—the effort to speak truthfully, the effort to act kindly, and so on. But effort is also singled out as a factor of the Eightfold Path because we can cultivate this quality in our meditation practice. We do this by getting to know what effort feels like as a moment-to-moment experience.

Are we slumping? If so, can we straighten up? Are we slacking, letting ourselves be carried away on every stray thought? If so, can we resolve to be mindful?

Over-effort is a problem for many of us. We want to be enlightened now, this minute. Can we relax? Remember, this is a gradual path, and we can learn to enjoy the journey. If we can't relax, can we feel the tensions? Let the experience of over-effort itself become the focus for meditation.

As we stumble between slacking and over-effort, mindfulness guides us towards right effort, where we're alert and interested but not hoping to gain anything from meditation. In time, that balance becomes more motivating than the false hopes of over-effort or the dozy delight of slacking.

As we develop right effort in meditation, we can apply it in daily life. First, we have the here-and-now effort to prevent harmful states like greed and ill-will from arising. If we maintain mindfulness, the hindrances don't get a chance to blossom and spread their seeds. It's as simple as that.

But sadly, we forget to be mindful much of the time in daily life. It's often pain of one form or another that wakes us up. Pain, whether emotional or physical, can stir fear, anxiety, worry, anger, blame, despair. It's easy to make a bad situation worse.

If we can remember this strand of right effort—the need to prevent unwholesome states from arising—we will bring mindfulness to the forefront, contain the negativity, prevent the negative spiral. It's especially important to make this effort during a busy day. Otherwise, minor irritations and frustrations build up and we might end up saying something hurtful, spoiling a friendship.

We could follow the practice of three-minute breathing spaces, which are part of Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction programme. First, we acknowledge how we feel, letting the emotions settle as we track them mindfully. We then follow the breath for a minute and end by reminding ourselves of the larger picture and whatever task or activity we're about to resume, moving back into this mindfully.

We can also use right effort in the broader sense, choosing directions in life which will minimise laziness, aggression, meanness—all our worst characteristics—while encouraging our positive qualities. Many people report that life made a turn for the better when they started meditation practice and found sangha friends, which naturally led to Dhamma study and regular retreats. These supportive conditions bring out the best in us, take the rough edges off our worst traits.

Finally, we have the here-and-now effort to develop and make the most of our wholesome qualities. Meditation is the key. Vipassanā strengthens equanimity, joy and all the factors of enlightenment, while mettā trains us to see the good in others and the good in ourselves.

Next we have right mindfulness, and for this I thought it would be interesting to go through the Buddha's teaching on full awareness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. Here's the quotation:

"One acts in full awareness when going forward and returning, when looking ahead and looking away, when flexing and extending the limbs, when eating, drinking, defecating and urinating, walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking and keeping silent."

Basically, we are to be fully aware in all aspects of life, every moment of every day.

Full awareness requires a broad understanding of our actions, as well as registering our moment-to-moment experience. Say we're walking to a neighbour's house. We could be mindful of the physical sensations of walking to keep us in the present moment. For full awareness, the context must also be borne in mind: we are going to visit our neighbour.

While en route to work in the morning, we can remind ourselves regularly that we are indeed on our way to work—not to Shangri-La or wherever our daydreams are leading us. Instead of the detailed noting we use for Mahasi retreat practice, broad-brush phrases work better here. We can note, "going to work, going to work."

It sounds obvious, but how easy it is to forget the bigger picture. We go to work on autopilot, so familiar with every step of the journey that we can devote our time to worrying or daydreaming. The note "going to work" lifts us out of the doldrums, lets us feel more purposeful, helps us appreciate our surroundings.

Within that broad awareness, we keep track of body movements like walking, reaching out, turning and so on. It can be a challenge to include inner and outer realities. At times we want to withdraw, abandon worldly cares, just breathe.

At other times our attention is totally external, fascinated by whatever is happening around us. The challenge is to keep both worlds in mind—to include body awareness when entranced by the external world, to remember the broader context when our attention is pulled within.

Reminding ourselves of the broader context can expose hidden emotions. We might be reluctant to note "going to work," for example, but later in the day be quite happy to note "going home." The reluctance indicates some negativity about work. If we don't make the note, that negativity might later sneak out as coldness or irritation. Unwittingly, we alienate our colleagues and make the situation worse. The note "going to work" shows us the weariness or anxiety or depression. Although it might feel worse than heading for the job on autopilot, bearing with the feelings means the negativity can be acknowledged. Imperceptibly, perhaps, our working life gets easier as a result.

Even for less emotionally charged activities, the experience of going forward can differ from returning. Say I have to nip down to the shops for groceries. I'm often bright and purposeful on the way out. My step is light and I look with interest at the neighbour's garden. Coming home, my steps are more plodding, my eyes downcast. What I'm seeing here is the dukkha of transience. Each new activity offers a glimmer of hope that this world can make us happy. But when the choice between apples and oranges, biscuits and cake have been made and all the money spent, it becomes clear that my shopping spree has not delivered the goods I was secretly hoping for.

The pattern can vary. For instance, the prospect of meeting friends may find us brighter on the way home than heading out. It's worthwhile noting this—it helps us to appreciate our friends when we see how they lift our mood.

The second task is to be fully aware when looking ahead and looking away. Looking ahead reminds us of our destination, our purpose, so it helps with the broad context aspect of full awareness. When we look at anything deliberately, we can also interpret this as looking ahead, even if our head is turning aside to look at something on our left or right.

While looking ahead is often stimulating, looking away often carries subtle dukkha. A friend practising mindfulness of speech found that her head turned slightly to one side when reacting against what another person was saying. Once she had detected the pattern, she was then able to use this as a wake-up call to notice aversion. Her communication could then be much more honest and straightforward.

Becoming mindful of looking ahead and away can tune us into the subtle dukkha of transience. Maybe the daffodils in a neighbour's garden take our fancy and we spend a moment looking at them. Then we look away, seeking out the next visual treat. Without registering it, we've tired of the daffodils. These persistent, minor disappointments promote cynicism. The world is full of false promises. Everything lets us down in the end. But if we prime ourselves to be mindful of looking ahead and looking away, we may notice a subtle expectation in the former and disappointment in the latter. Over time, we learn that expectation and disappointment are of our own making. It's much easier to appreciate daffodils when we expect less of them.

Our third task, flexing and extending the limbs, has less emotional significance. Instead, the action connects us with neutral experiences that we usually ignore. We flex and extend our limbs several times while washing, dressing, doing household chores, manual labour, opening doors, and numerous other tasks. As we become mindful of these movements, we add bodily awareness to daily life. The body offers a restful focus for a mind that so easily hits overdrive, making grandiose plans and assuming we can do ten things at once. If we put our bodies in the picture, we come down to earth and our plans and promises become more realistic.

Outside of retreat, eating mindfully is often a challenge. The first spoonful might be savoured, but by the second we're already taking out our mobile phones. I find the need to set clear red lines here: no phones, books, or entertainment other than the pleasure of mindful eating. This develops a prescient of joy, or mudita—a joyful response to the good things in life.

Eating and drinking brings us to urinating and defecating. The activities themselves are usually neutral experiences. It is the thought of what's happening that gets to us. The social taboo around these essential bodily functions can result in embarrassment and shame. The way out, of course, is to feel and acknowledge the emotional baggage. This totally unnecessary shame will start to burn out, and we develop a healthy respect for the body's ability to discard its waste.

We can practise with the Buddha's guidance in many areas of daily life. During any journey, ideally from the start, we can pick a phrase like "going to the shops" and repeat this regularly. We can do the same on the way home, being curious as to whether the outward and homeward journeys feel the same or different.

We can take an interest in what our eyes are doing and notice any emotional undertones. Are they looking ahead? Is there a sense of expectancy, of interest? Or are they looking away? Is there a quiet judgment, a disinterest? We can be mindful during communications, spotting when we feel hurt, bored, or irritated by the conversation, and when we feel buoyed up, interested, or excited by the interaction.

The final strand in the Eightfold Path is Right Concentration. We need to make time for formal meditation practice, where the mind can come to stillness and rest in present awareness. For this, we need to develop a habit of regular daily meditation. Some prefer mornings, some prefer evenings. If you can do both, ideal. How long to meditate for? That really depends on your circumstances, how many other demands there are on your time. If you can do an hour, excellent. But whatever is possible—forty minutes, thirty minutes, whatever you can manage.

It always helps if you can find support. Would anyone in your household meditate with you? Could you find a local group? The single most important factor in sustaining my meditation in the early years was the fact that I found a local group and got into the habit of meeting them every week for meditation and Dhamma study discussion. They soon became my best friends and supported many aspects of the Eightfold Path. There are also lots of online options for support nowadays. For example, there is an online meditation hall that you can access via the Satipanya website. It's a Zoom link, open all day, but the only times you're likely to see others are six in the morning and eight in the evening. The morning slot has an hour's meditation, followed by some chanting and mettā practice. The evening slot has meditation, followed by mettā and joy practices and chanting.

Retreats give the best support for developing concentration. We shut ourselves away from the world for a few days or a few weeks so that there isn't the continuous inflow of stimulation, views, demands, and responsibilities that are part and parcel of everyday life. Retreat conditions give optimal support for Right Concentration. We learn to focus the mind, gather its energies, channel them in the direction of liberation.

Concentration is an unfortunate translation for the Pali word samādhi, which conveys a sense of restfulness rather than forcing. We're resting attention on some aspect of present experience. We have the analogy of a bee searching for honey. First, she has to track a flower as it bobs around. This represents the first stage of concentration, when we're making an effort to bring attention back to the breath whenever the mind wanders. Then the bee lands on the flower and is carried around by it, no longer having to make the effort to track. This is the second stage of concentration, where our attention is riveted by the sensations and feelings of present experience. We no longer need

that effort to direct attention. Mindfulness continues of its own accord. Just as the bee drinks nectar in these moments, we drink the nectar of direct experience, the intimate contact with reality. It's from direct experience that we learn the Dhamma for ourselves, convincing ourselves of the Four Noble Truths and the other ways the Buddha expressed his understanding.

So do make time for retreats in your life. It can seem as though we're always too busy for this. When I was working full-time, I planned retreats well in advance—several months ahead, when my diary was still empty. That way I could give my family plenty of notice and say a clear no to whatever other demands came in during that period, without letting people down.

I hope this resumé of the Noble Eightfold Path helps you to see that there are many areas in life that can be developed as spiritual practice. To come back to one thing: the importance of support. Do make an effort to find friends who also want to walk this path. This is Sangha, spiritual friendship. Real-life friends are best, but online also works well. I have a friend who lives in India, and we regularly exchange Dhamma questions and comments by email. Our friends influence us, and we in turn influence them. When we get despondent, they encourage us. When we're trying to pick our way through some thorny moral issue, we have someone to talk it over with.

When Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, remarked that good friendship was half of the spiritual life, the Buddha replied that good friendship was the whole of spiritual life.

May we all find the friendship and support we need to follow the Eightfold Path in our relationships, our work, and all aspects of life.

CHAPTER 12

The Hindrances - Read by Finola O'Siochrú

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

> *This talk offers a comprehensive and accessible exploration of the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa) that obstruct meditation practice: desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (vyāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and remorse (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). Using the beautiful analogy of a garden where mindfulness acts as the gardener tending to weeds, the teaching emphasizes that we overcome these obstacles not by fighting them but by making them our friends—transforming enemies into allies through understanding.*
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> *The talk provides detailed guidance on recognizing each hindrance through its physical and mental manifestations. Desire appears as a pulling sensation toward pleasure; aversion manifests as tension and pushing away from discomfort; dullness brings heaviness and the allure of unconsciousness; restlessness shows up as fidgeting and worry; and doubt generates persuasive thoughts that confirm our limitations. The Buddha's teaching of the two arrows illuminates how our reactive aversion to pain creates more suffering than the original sensation itself.*
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> *Practical techniques are offered for working with each hindrance, from noting practice to grounding attention in the body. The teaching reveals how the basic constituents of hindrances—rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion—can decompose and transform into their opposite virtues: hatred into love, delusion into wisdom, greed into generosity. Personal examples from the teacher's own experience, including recovery from major surgery, demonstrate how retreat practice with hindrances translates into greater engagement, clarity, and equanimity in daily life.*

The hindrances underlie the various difficulties we come across in meditation—wandering mind, falling asleep, getting discouraged, and so on. We have to overcome the hindrances, but not by fighting them to the death. How do we overcome our enemies? By making them our friends. I'm paraphrasing from Abraham Lincoln here, but I think this applies wonderfully to our work with the hindrances.

The analogy of a garden is also useful. A garden has grass and flowers and weeds, and needs a gardener to tend it. So too our spiritual life has restful and uplifting aspects as well as hindrances, and needs mindfulness to tend it. To a large extent the gardener can leave the grass and flowers alone, just watering or feeding them occasionally. The main work is in pulling up the weeds—if possible, doing this while they are small and

before they can flourish and spread their seeds. So too, a large part of vipassana involves working with the hindrances, if possible catching these early and letting mindfulness weed them out before they prompt us into thoughts or words or actions. It might not be as uplifting as watering the flowers of metta, but it can be satisfying in its own way.

Now, as all you gardeners will know, the weeds have a way of coming back anyhow. Weeding has to be a long-term commitment, and when we've done our share for the day, we can congratulate ourselves and feel the satisfaction of a job well done.

Another gardening analogy that's useful here is to see that the basic constituents of the weed are the same as the flowers—roots and stalks and leaves, all made from carbon and hydrogen and oxygen. At heart there is no difference. And so the weed, once uprooted, can decompose to rich soil in which new flowers can grow. In the same way, the basic constituents of the hindrances are not in essence different from the more beautiful aspects of life, which also decompose into sensations and feelings and moods.

What holds the weed together is a combination of greed, hatred, and delusion. We uproot the weed by feeling these underlying drives within the sensations and emotions and thoughts. Once these drives are felt and recognized, they start to subside. That's one great power of mindfulness—it allows negativity to burn away. As the negativity in the hindrance burns away, its energy is transformed into the opposite virtue: hatred to love, delusion to wisdom, greed to generosity. So it's really worthwhile work.

What are these hindrances and how can we recognize them? The Buddha described them in five varieties: desire, aversion, dullness and lethargy, restlessness, and doubt.

Starting with desire: this is the impulse of wanting that arises in response to pleasure. Although we might not feel particularly hungry, when we see or smell pizza most of us would want to start nibbling a piece. We might be late for work, but when we step into the shower and feel the warm water flowing over us, we want to relax and enjoy it. Seeing an erotic image might stir sexual fantasies. A pleasant memory comes to mind and we want to start reminiscing. All advertising works on desire. We suddenly believe that we would be happy if only we had a BMW, hair coloured by L'Oréal, Starbucks coffee. When we get any pleasurable stimulus, physical or mental, we normally respond with desire, wanting to get more of the pleasure.

Indulging some desires can obviously be harmful and lead to problems like overeating, drug addiction, sexual deviancy, power obsession, and so on. On the other hand, many desires are beneficial. The desire for food keeps us alive. Reminiscing about a

pleasant memory can help us generate goodwill. Desire for friends helps us to develop social skills. And desire drives our spiritual journey—the desire for enlightenment, for happiness, the wish to relieve suffering. These propel us along the path.

So there's no need to judge our desires as wrong. Desire is neither right nor wrong. It simply arises in response to what we feel is pleasant. It's part of human nature. In daily life we need to be able to judge whether a desire is skilful—like wanting to put on a hat when our head feels cold—or unskilful, like calling in sick when we want to watch Wimbledon. But in formal meditation practice we rarely have to go to the trouble of judging. This simplifies matters. All we have to do is get to know what desire feels like, to learn to recognize this basic human urge for the good things in life, and to trust that mindfulness is digging away at the roots of desire as we simply feel its effects on our mind and body. Here again we have the magic of mindfulness. Very quietly, without fuss, it transforms whatever it meets.

So what does desire feel like? Look out for a sense of pulling towards something, or being pulled towards something. I often find I'm leaning forward slightly when desire is manifesting. For example, while you're waiting in the queue for food, are you totally relaxed or is there something like magnetism pulling you towards the sideboard? During sitting meditation we can sometimes feel that sense of pulling towards a pleasant experience. When I find myself slipping off into daydreams, I counter this by taking an interest in this whole business of pleasure and desire. I feel the pleasure that the daydream is giving me.

My mind is drawn towards the pleasant movie that the daydream is projecting. There may be a slight smile on my face. There is often a warm, billowy sensation around my chest or waist. There may be pleasant tingles running up and down my neck.

As well as these pleasant sensations, I can feel a sense of strain—tension on my face perhaps, or a kind of desperate need to believe in the daydream. Nowadays I can easily recognize this straining and desperation as manifestations of desire. And I can feel the anxiety inherent in desire, the fear that all pleasure will be lost if I lose my grip on those gorgeous sensations.

The wonderful thing is that our being, physical and mental, learns from experience. Feeling the desperation and tension associated with desire, I am nowadays more willing to relax my hold on the pleasure of the daydream. The desire to daydream fades away. As desire burns itself out, we grow more content. Those insatiable urges for more, more, more, which are so typical of our consumer society, lose some of their grip. We begin to trust that things are actually fine just as they are. What a relief!

Now, I made it sound easy, but in fact we will all be working with desire until we are fully enlightened. Letting go of deep desires is not easy. It can be quite scary—but this is an example of working with the hindrance of aversion.

Aversion is at the root of fear, anger, and hatred. At a milder level, we can feel aversion in irritation, impatience, sulkiness, and other emotions. Aversion is actually another form of desire—the wish to get rid of what we don't like. We normally respond with aversion to any unpleasant stimulus. Our knee starts throbbing and we want to move or stretch to relieve the pain. Someone coughs, disturbing our peaceful meditation, and we want to murder them.

Many of our emotions spring from aversion. We get bad news and react with anger and anxiety. Our partner leaves us for another person and we are overcome with jealousy. We fail a test and are devastated by despair.

The Buddha described our aversive reaction as getting shot by two arrows. The first arrow is the unpleasant sensation—the knee pain or the disturbing cough. The second arrow is our aversive reaction. Unwittingly, we stab ourselves in reaction to the first arrow, and it's the second arrow which really hurts.

Aversion can have a very negative impact on our lives, but in some cases the aversive reaction is the wise one. If we witness cruelty, anger may spur us to do something to stop it. Feeling shame after being caught cheating persuades us not to cheat again. So we need to make friends with the experience of aversion, so that we are not afraid of our anger when anger is the wise response, willing to feel shame when shame is the wise response. Aversion is very much linked with wisdom, so working with aversion strengthens our ability to live wisely.

Again, it's important not to judge aversion when it arises in our meditation, but to let our system learn to recognize it, make friends with it.

How can we recognize aversion? Physical pain is one we all have to work with from time to time. See if you can locate the basic pain—the throbbing in the knee, for example. And then let yourself feel how the rest of the body is sitting with that. Is your face in a grimace? Are your shoulders hunched? Is your stomach in a knot? Is your thigh tense? You may also get an overall sense of pushing, as if your body is physically trying to push the pain away. Or it can manifest as a sense of the body straining to get away from the pain, as if it's trying to tear itself away from the painful site.

While physical pain is a great teacher, we shouldn't let our enthusiasm for enlightenment run away with our common sense about how to take care of ourselves. When the pain gets too bad, it's best to move so as to relieve it. But move mindfully, as this part of

the meditation can also be a great teacher, especially if you move very slowly. Keeping your attention in the body as it moves, you might feel the pain fading away. Also, out of the corner of your eyes, so to speak, you might notice your mood brightening. This is an example of aversion fading away.

It's a really powerful experience because it shows us that the real suffering in the situation was in our mental reaction rather than in our knee. The anxiety or bad humour provoked by the pain was the real source of misery, not the physical sensations in your knee.

I remember one time when I injured my back. I was acutely aware of the injury and walking very carefully and stiffly to avoid any sudden pulls, lying down for hours each evening after work. I felt imprisoned by the pain, unable to relax or enjoy anything because of it. But because I was being mindful, I realised that I couldn't actually feel the pain.

When I put my attention on the middle of my back where I knew I had the pain, all I felt was a blank. This is one effect of aversion—causing so much mental disturbance that the basic sensation itself is suppressed. It was a few days before my mind calmed down enough to be able to feel the pain, and ironically, I no longer felt imprisoned by it. I could enjoy life again. This really helped me believe that the problem with pain doesn't stem from the physical sensation but from the mental reaction of aversion.

Another way to see this is to alternate your focus of attention. If your right knee is throbbing, let your attention dwell there for a while. Then let your attention shift to your left knee. As you switch, you might just feel a slight lightening of your mood. If so, you may also realise that it's the mood that is determining your sense of suffering, not the pain itself.

Now, it can be very difficult to sit with pain and let yourself feel all this. Your mind may be buzzing with thoughts of the sort: "This is mad, I'm going to injure myself," or "Why am I torturing myself like this?" So let's remind ourselves why we try to sit and bear the pain. It's to let our system learn about the second arrow. The more clearly we see that the hurt results from our reaction—our wish to get rid of pain—the more willing we are to stop stabbing ourselves with the second arrow. Gradually we learn to relax around the pain and may even experience moments of compassion for a being in pain. The weeds of aversion are transforming into the flower of compassion.

We can work mindfully with difficult emotions in a similar way. Suppose we start feeling irritated and angry, for example. If we don't recognise this as a form of aversion, we could spend the whole meditation period mulling over angry thoughts. Or we could judge the meditation as useless, thinking we can't meditate when we're angry. In both cases, aversion is flourishing. The weed has been allowed to grow and spread its seeds.

But if we recognise that the weed of anger is springing up, we can start digging away at it mindfully. How is anger experienced? The angry thoughts—instead of believing them and following them up, can you note them as "thinking"? Are your lips pursed? Is your jaw clenched? How does your stomach feel? This approach digs around the root of the anger. It helps us acknowledge anger as just another manifestation of this body-mind system we inhabit. We begin to relax with the emotion, not to be so judgmental about it or let it rule our lives. Again, we may sometimes feel compassion for a being going through the pain of anger.

One other aspect of aversion that troubles most of us is our habit of judging. I've been saying there's no need to judge desire or aversion as wrong. I remind myself regularly of this too. But the habit of judging goes so deep that I don't always remember my own advice when I'm out of my comfort zone. And then, of course, we can start judging ourselves because we're judging, and the misery deepens.

It's wonderful to be able to note "judging, judging" and get to know the fierce judginess that demands and expects only the best. In mindful awareness, the judge will also boil down to sensations and feelings and thoughts—nothing to be so scared of. How does the judge manifest in you? In me, the judge makes me feel top-heavy, with the weight of disapproval I feel in my forehead especially. At times I can also feel the scared child cowering in my chest and throat. Nowadays the scared child and judge often find a way to compromise and forgive each other. The judge asks forgiveness for harshness, the child for mistrusting the protection and guidance being offered by the judge.

One confusing aspect of working with aversion is that the unpleasant feelings are amplified in mindful awareness. We avoid or suppress those painful feelings when we're letting the aversion flourish—mulling over angry thoughts, dismissing the situation as a waste of time. When we dig mindfully at the roots of aversion, we begin to feel the pain of what we've been trying to avoid. This can be confusing. We thought mindfulness was supposed to relieve suffering, not make it worse. So this hindrance can be quite a challenge to work with.

But there's no way out. It's only by experiencing the pain of aversion that our system learns to recognise that it is hurting itself. Each demonstration of this painful truth strengthens our faith in the process. Working with desire, we learn to let go. Working

with aversion, we learn to come forth. Often it's like walking a tightrope as we step gingerly from one to the other—relaxing the tense grip of desire, bringing attention towards what we fear or dislike.

Along with delusion, desire and aversion are the basic urges holding the other hindrances together. In fact, working with any of the hindrances strengthens our ability to work with all of them.

So let's look at a third hindrance: dullness and lethargy, or sloth and torpor if you prefer the formal translation. This is a familiar one for most of us—snoozing happily through the hour's meditation, occasionally jerking awake to realize we're in the meditation hall, hoping we're not snoring before nodding off again. It's such an alluring hindrance. We feel so happy and relaxed as we slip off into unconsciousness. Sometimes we don't actually fall asleep, but the mind becomes heavy, sluggish, and dull.

Remember, all we have to do is register the thoughts, feelings, and sensations involved. But how can we register anything if we're falling asleep? That's our work—to stay conscious enough to feel the strong pull towards sleep, noting "sleepy, sleepy," and to find the energy to note "dullness, dullness" when that heavy blanket covers our mind.

An upright posture helps us stay awake, so straighten the spine at the first sense of sleepiness. Noting itself is energizing, so see if you can put more energy into noting "sleepy, sleepy." Try to stir up interest by asking yourself whether this is a pleasant experience. Are you enjoying being sleepy? Often there's a lovely sense of being safe. Why not try to stay awake enough to enjoy this? There may be nice tingly sensations somewhere. Or do you feel heavy, leaden, aversive to the experience? Try to dredge up the energy to note all these.

If that doesn't work and you keep dropping off, try opening your eyes and look at anything bright—the sky outside, for example. Big wide staring eyes are best. Joseph Goldstein says he imagines there are toothpicks between his eyelids propping them open. And if that doesn't work, try elevating your hands a few inches so they need some energy to keep them elevated. You can also use whatever mental stimuli might work to keep you awake—reciting a poem you know by heart, or the Metta Sutta if you know that. And if all that doesn't work, then stand up.

Again, remember that you're not trying to get rid of sleepiness or dullness, but only to stay awake enough to feel their manifestation as sensations, feelings, thoughts. As we do this, our system becomes more able to deal with powerful forces of suppression that keep us dull and passive in life.

At one retreat, I was working a lot with dullness and sleepiness until I suddenly recognized the sense of waiting running through them. I realized I was waiting for the dullness to pass, not wanting to engage with the experience. With that recognition, the dullness disappeared. But afterwards, when I went to meetings at work where I didn't have much to contribute, I often noticed that subtle undercurrent of waiting for this to be over—a form of passivity preventing me from engaging with the meeting. Whenever I recognized this, to my surprise, I would suddenly pipe up and say something. And it was always a useful contribution, well received. So the work on retreat with sleepiness helped me become brighter, more forthright, and more engaged with others in daily life.

Don't judge a sleepy meditation as a useless one—an easy mistake to make. If you're doing your best to stay awake despite the powerfully suppressive urges towards sleep, then you are uprooting weeds at a great rate.

The fourth hindrance is restlessness, which the Buddha links with remorse, guilt, and shame. We can become physically restless—fidgeting, scratching our head, looking at our watch, repeatedly adjusting our posture. Or it can manifest as a mental state, as our mind hops from one inconsequential thought to another. We might not be aware of the underlying emotions of guilt, shame, and remorse, but these can manifest as a knot of worry or self-judgment.

It's so easy to believe our worries and judgments. If we do, we can spend the whole meditation period in a frenzy of thought, probably not even noticing that we're shifting around and fidgeting as well. This is letting the weed of restlessness flourish and sow its seeds. So our first task is to recognize: "Oh, this is restlessness," or "This is worrying, this is judging." If we can do that, the gardener of mindfulness starts the great work of weeding, replacing each persuasive worry with the note "worrying, worrying." We begin to feel the manifestation of this hindrance.

If you find yourself shifting around on the cushion, feel the movement. If you want to scratch your head, desist. Feel the itchy sensation instead. I often get sudden prickles like needles sticking into my thighs. They really make me jump. Sometimes the restlessness fades away after a while of mindful awareness. Sometimes we can't maintain mindfulness and get caught up repeatedly in worrying and fidgeting. It can help to open your eyes and gaze at something in the room to ground you as the worries swirl around in your mind.

As some of you will know, I underwent major surgery in 2013 and lost my voice box. For weeks following this, I was seething with restlessness and worry.

The first days in ICU were the worst, but then I was moved to a ward, and luckily I was placed beside a window. There was a tree outside, and as soon as I saw it, my eyes became glued to its branches. I even sent my visitor Margaret away, though I had relied on her so much while I was in intensive care. The tree was what my psyche wanted, not human company.

Although I still had a cauldron of restlessness and worry bubbling away inside, it was as if the worries could die away into the strong, steady branches of that tree.

Remember that all we're trying to do is let the hindrance manifest in whatever way it wants to, using whatever supports we can find so as to maintain mindfulness rather than believe the worrying or judging thoughts or succumb to the urge to fidget. All the while, restlessness is expending its energy. The weeds are springing up at a great rate—maybe an alarming rate—but each one meets with mindfulness before it gets a chance to sow its seeds.

In my own case, I can look back and see that a huge level of restlessness burned its energy away during those first weeks post-op. As it did, I began to sense a vast ocean of calm that permeates the world. In my imagination, it's there in the spaces between things, quiet and gentle, willing to let my flurries and worries sink into it, endlessly receptive to all my woes.

So I have great trust now in the benefit of sitting still with this hindrance, opening my eyes to look at something if I need to anchor my mind more firmly. I might feel almost as if I'm exploding, but after a while I often sense again that quiet ocean lapping at the borders of restlessness. The explosion of sensations and feelings shoot into its darkness and disappear, leaving no trace.

The final hindrance is doubt. It's really challenging for us to sit with our desires and aversions, nodding off to sleep only to awaken all fidgety and worried. So who could blame us for doubting whether any of this is doing us any good? We come on retreat with high hopes of deep insight, but after a day or two we can get dispirited. In our disappointment, we fall into the hindrance of doubt.

Sometimes we doubt the teachings and wonder whether we should go back to Christianity or try some other path. Sometimes we doubt the teacher—they don't seem inspiring or to have much wisdom. At other times we doubt ourselves. We think we're not up to this practice.

Just like worry, it's so easy to believe the thoughts generated by doubt. If we do, we can spend the whole meditation period mulling over unanswerable questions. Is this the right way? Does she know what she's talking about? Even more harmfully, we can confirm our doubts: "I'm useless at this. I can't meditate. I should have known better than to come here."

Doubt can have a very negative impact on our lives. It makes for cynicism. We see the flaw in everything and everybody. We grow suspicious and mistrustful. One reason we indulge doubtful thoughts is that they're easy on our psyche. They don't challenge us. They look to past doubts and confirm them: "I can't do this. I knew I wouldn't be able to." In the short term, it actually feels comforting to confirm our doubts. We can feel strong because we were right. We're always right. Doubt forms an effective border to prevent change and the pain of growth.

But as with all the hindrances, doubt can be appropriate at times. If someone lets us down repeatedly, it makes sense to doubt their word and take steps to protect ourselves against further hurt. On the spiritual path, we are continually being pushed beyond our comfort zone, needing to verify the teachings again and again. These are healthy doubts. We need to be able to note "doubting, doubting" and be at ease with that state.

The big step is to become aware that this is nothing more than the hindrance of doubt. Sounds easy, but those thoughts can be very persuasive, deliciously confirming of our sense of knowing exactly what to expect of ourselves and the world. If you get as far as noting that you are being hijacked by a storm of doubt, that is a major achievement. From then on, it's a question of maintaining that perspective rather than falling into the temptation to believe the thoughts generated by doubt.

Ground yourself in your body, feeling your posture or the breath to provide a solid foundation for your observation of this hindrance. Keep noting "doubting, doubting" so that the thoughts won't get a foothold. But remember that we're not trying to overcome doubt by suppressing it. We're letting it manifest, getting to know the experience, allowing ourselves to feel doubtful. Sometimes I tend to space out when doubt arises.

Physical sensations become vague and distant, as if I'm in a cloud where things seem intangible. I have a sense that something is wrong but can't put my finger on what it is. The noting word "unsure, unsure" is helpful here, or "distant, distant."

Then I might become aware of some quiet but insistent thoughts that repeat themselves over and over. "No, no, no," for example. I change the noting word to "insisting, insisting" to help me feel the intensity associated with the thought. This has a physical component—tension in my face, perhaps. Once I can find the physical manifestation, it's much easier to maintain mindfulness.

The thoughts might subside while the tension grows, until eventually I feel myself capitulate and another thought—"maybe, maybe"—slowly starts to manifest. Thus, some boundary to my psyche is beginning to dissolve, and self-doubt edges towards self-confidence.

Self-doubt can also manifest as anxiety. The doubtful thoughts are formed as questions like, "Am I doing this right?" I find this easier to work with because, in my experience anyhow, anxiety is more tangible and has more physical energy. Again, it's a question of allowing the stresses and strains of anxiety to be felt—various tensions in the body, perhaps—and the breath may grow shallow and rapid. I usually find some pleasant tingly sensations as well, and can feel how the anxious thoughts seem to buzz around those.

The driving force of anxiety, in my experience, is quite a pleasant buzz. But there is a lot of unpleasant physical tension needed to support the buzz. And as my attention broadens to take this in, the buzz of anxiety loses its pleasure and starts to subside.

Self-doubt was the last temptation to trouble the Buddha before his enlightenment. To overcome it, he touched the ground with his fingers, calling the earth as witness that he had done enough work to merit enlightenment. One teacher suggested we follow his example when we are assailed by doubts. I've found it very helpful at times, and so I'm passing on this suggestion.

In summary, then, the hindrances represent our various challenges in meditation. They come in five different flavours: desire to keep hold of the lovely stuff, aversion to the rotten stuff, falling asleep, getting restless, and being assailed by doubt.

Now, you don't have to worry about being able to categorise each difficulty as one or other of these. In fact, several hindrances can be working together at times to make our lives miserable. For example, anger includes a pleasant buzz of self-righteousness. Impatience includes a pleasant suggestion of self-importance.

Sometimes we get a multiple hindrance attack. Our mind wanders restlessly, picking up one thought then another. We get angry at being so restless. We want to get in control of the restless, angry mind, to make it conform to what we think a good meditator's mind should be. But we can't get on top of things and start to doubt our ability to meditate. In despair, we grow sulky, we dull out and fall asleep.

At other times, we find we can relax and feel each passing disturbance without reacting. We feel the prickles of restlessness but let them be. To our surprise, perhaps, restlessness dies away. After a moment's quiet, the tension of anxiety surfaces, and we let it fill our bodies and minds as much as it wishes till it too subsides.

We can let each hindrance grow until we recognize it from its basic manifestation as physical sensations, moods, and thoughts. Upon recognition, the hindrance dies away to leave a moment's peace till we feel the next one sprouting up, disturbing us.

That's okay. This is our path. The hindrances form its borders.

May we and all beings be free from suffering.

CHAPTER 13

The Factors of Enlightenment

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

In this comprehensive retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan offers a detailed exploration of the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅgā), using the evocative image of wild geese flying in V-formation. Mindfulness (sati) leads the way, supported by two flanks: the calming factors of concentration (samādhi), equanimity (upekkhā), and tranquility (passaddhi) in the slipstream, and the energizing factors of energy (vīriya), investigation of Dhamma (dhammavicaya), and joy (pīti) on the wide flank pushing ahead.

Sheahan methodically examines each factor, explaining how they function individually and in balanced pairs. She describes mindfulness as our capacity to know experience without doing anything—simple data gathering that reveals how reactive patterns create suffering. The talk explores how concentration and energy balance each other, how equanimity and investigation work as partners, and how tranquility and joy complement one another. Drawing from personal experience, she shares candid reflections on her own struggles with equanimity and her late discovery of tranquility, offering practical guidance for working with each factor.

The teaching extends beyond formal meditation to daily life through the five spiritual faculties (pañca indriya), where mindfulness, energy, and concentration are joined by faith (saddhā) and wisdom (paññā). Sheahan emphasizes that these factors develop naturally through consistent practice, even during difficult periods when we cannot feel them working. The talk concludes with encouragement to trust the process, recognizing that bearing with turmoil mindfully strengthens these qualities that lead toward liberation.

While the hindrances describe the difficulties we meet in meditation, the factors of enlightenment are the abilities we develop in meditation.

Bhante uses the image of wild geese in flight, and I found this very helpful. The leader is mindfulness. In support there are two flanks. If you watch wild geese, you will often find one flank flying more in the slipstream of the leader, taking it easy, while the other flank is spread out, almost as if they are vying to take over the lead. That's a very helpful image for these supporting factors.

Three of them are calming, helping us to take it easy. These three are concentration, equanimity, and tranquility. Then there is the wide flank, encouraging us to push ahead. These are energy, investigation of Dhamma, and joy.

So let's look in more detail at the seven factors which develop as we meditate.

Starting with mindfulness. It's ironic that this factor which is essentially so simple is also so hard to describe. It's a bit easier to describe what it's not. Mindfulness is not thinking or dreaming or planning or remembering or trying to work out what life is all about. It's the potential we have to know that we're thinking or dreaming or planning, as well as to feel the moods and emotions underlying all the mental activity and the physical sensations that accompany all this.

So much of our lives we are caught up in mental activity. This is the doing aspect of our minds. We're fascinated by our own thoughts and opinions, our stories about what happened in the past and what's going to happen in the future, our speculations on what life is all about. We lose touch with the potential for the human mind to simply know experience without trying to do anything at all.

To practice mindfulness, we tune into the raw data that is coming into our mind—sounds, physical sensations, and the feelings produced by moods and emotions, as well as the thoughts that emerge from the mind as it tries to process all this. We encourage ourselves to drop the fascination with the detail of our thoughts. It doesn't mean we have to stop thinking, but to know that a thought is happening whenever it is.

So this basic potential of our minds to know experience is the leading factor of enlightenment. It's hard for us to believe that just knowing is so powerful spiritually. We feel we have to do something about whatever we know in order to get anywhere. But gradually we come to accept that it is our misunderstandings that lead us into trouble. We are reacting too quickly without fully knowing what is going on. As we acknowledge this, we become more willing to spend time gathering the raw data, getting to know the feelings and emotions that drive our thinking mind.

So mindfulness is our first tool in learning what life is all about. Simple data gathering, you could say. Getting the feel for the situation. Letting ourselves dwell in the here and now.

Let's look at the supporting factors now. First in the slipstream is concentration. But that word can crinkle our foreheads because we associate it with doing hard sums at school. The word focus is sometimes used. We direct our attention at something. Usually in meditation we start off by focusing on the sensations of breathing. The Pali word for this factor is samādhi, which gives the sense of the mind resting. So this factor rests the mind in the sensations of breathing or some other focus for attention.

Why does it help to focus attention? One reason is that it helps us stay present rather than get distracted into daydreams and fantasies. It also quiets the mind when its range of interest is limited, and when we have a narrow focus for attention we can go deeper into that phenomenon. Think of using a telescope. You have to look through a narrow tube so your range of vision is limited, but you can see far more clearly within this narrow range.

Happily, the Dhamma can be learned from anything, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. The four noble truths, the wheel of dependent origination—these are sewn into each sensation of the tummy rising and falling.

In essence then, any focus for attention will do. We normally start with the breath because this anchors our mind in physical reality, so our meditation is grounded, embodied. Also, those sensations are often felt as calming. If not, then try various touch points—the hands resting in the lap, the feet on the ground—whatever sensations provide the easiest resting place for the mind.

Once our usual fascination with stories and thoughts has shifted towards fascination for present experience, we can loosen this focus. Loosening the focus lets our minds be more natural, more ordinary. And that's what we want to get to know: our ordinary mind. So if a sound or an itchy feeling attracts attention, we can let the mind focus on these and learn the Dhamma there. We let the mind dwell wherever it is naturally drawn.

I don't know about you, but my mind is naturally drawn to detail.

When I rest attention in any feeling, a sort of fascination sets up, a longing to know it more deeply. So I like the narrow focus. But when that fascination leads to a sense of straining to see more deeply, then I need to widen my focus to see the broader picture and include that very sense of straining. Otherwise, I start getting uptight. When I feel the strain mindfully, I often find that I can relax again.

And whenever a strong emotion comes up, it's usually best to broaden the focus, to take in the full mind-body system and feel how this emotion is embodied. We feel the sensations, the threads of aversion and desire, the thought stream that might be erupting. When the emotion has burned away a bit, we might again be drawn to some focus in the body, often the kernel of the emotion's energy. Attending to this, we might hear the thoughts and sense the feelings that bind us to the emotional state. This ability to focus and to broaden and narrow the focus as necessary is a great aid in deepening our self-knowledge.

Let's look at one of the factors in the wide flank now which pairs up with concentration so that the two balance one another out. This is the factor of energy. We need energy to accomplish anything. In meditation we need enough physical energy to sit upright or walk. Sounds easy, but remember those attacks of sleepiness, how desperately we long to lie down! We also need the mental energy of resolution. We resolve to be mindful. Every time we notice the mind has been wandering and come back to the breath, we are strengthening this factor of enlightenment.

When this factor is working well, we are alert and enthusiastic about the practice. We are fascinated by present experience and have a sense of zeal, a buzzing dedication to the here and now. At other times our energies go low and we can easily sink into the hindrances. Then again, we can get overly energised, striving impatiently for insight.

We strengthen the factor whenever we work skilfully with the hindrance of sleepiness. At these times we often need to find a more stimulating focus than the breath. That's the idea behind opening the eyes, standing up, and so forth that we discussed yesterday. Physical exercise is naturally energising, so going quite fast for the first few minutes of the walking meditation session helps. We can also stimulate ourselves mentally by reflecting on whatever inspired us to take up meditation practice and to come on retreat.

At times we can get over-energised, uptight and breathless with enthusiasm and zeal. Again, it can help to broaden the focus to give more room for the energy to burn off. Feeling the whole body can help, as can opening the eyes. Walking around the paddocks, rather than the short span used for walking meditation, can also burn off some pent-up craving for progress. We can also talk ourselves down, reminding ourselves to take it easy, that everything is fine, just as it is.

These two factors, concentration and energy, help each other out. When our energies are too high or too low, it usually helps to have a broad focus. When they are more balanced, the narrow focus channels all the energy into the Dhamma of each passing sensation and feeling.

Looking now at the next two supports: in the slipstream we have equanimity, and on the wide flank is investigation. Equanimity is that balance of mind that counters reactivity. It is the willingness not to seize every passing pleasure or oppose every passing irritant. It lets things be.

We strengthen equanimity every time we work skilfully with desire and aversion, gradually learning to let go of our addictions and surrender to what we dislike. This doesn't mean we become a marshmallow. We can still strive for what we feel is right

and good. But the striving is not stressing us out or blinding us to others' needs. It's a balanced movement towards an attainable goal. Likewise, we can oppose wrongdoing with equanimity. Great peacemakers like Nelson Mandela and Gandhi exemplify this, responding to injustice and oppression with wisdom rather than hatred.

Equanimity develops naturally as we see how phenomena arise and pass away. We can reflect on this on the broad scale, seeing how ephemeral are fashions and celebrities, for example. How people and institutions and political parties come to power and later fall from grace. How civilizations have died out. We can see it in our own lives. Many of the hopes and ambitions that fuelled us when we were young may be largely forgotten in middle and older age. Many cherished possessions and close relationships will have been lost.

Mindfulness helps us to see this in the minutiae of life—how each thought, emotion, sensation appears and disappears. We start asking ourselves what's the point in getting all hot and bothered about this; it will fade away in a few moments. Now that might sound as though we're distancing ourselves from life, but mindfulness doesn't work at a distance. It's a touchy-feely kind of learning, up close and personal. So the wisdom behind equanimity is very sensitive to our needs, our desires and aversions.

The willingness not to react comes from seeing again and again how futile it is to try to hold on to pleasure or avoid pain. As we experience the suffering caused by these reactions, we are persuaded to give up forcing things to be the way we want them to be.

Paradoxically, once we stop forcing, we find something else disappears as well. The problem we were trying to overcome vanishes without trace.

I couldn't see this clearly for many, many years. It even frightened me, the sudden loss of focus for my energies. While I struggled with moods and emotions, trying to get on top of things, there was at least a clear sense of what I was doing—struggling to solve a problem that, in my mind anyhow, desperately needed solving. Then there came the moment of surrender and the loss of any boundary against which I could push. It was so confusing I couldn't see the beauty in it.

Nowadays I'm much more used to the space that can open up when we stop reacting. It doesn't frighten me so much. I'm more willing to acknowledge the space and the fact that it has never actually hurt or threatened me in any way, despite all my mistrust and suspicions. As I grow easier with the space, my mind broadens. I find I can see things more easily from the other person's point of view. I'm more open to discussion, less frightened of failure.

So this is the factor of equanimity—a spaciousness that allows what we like and dislike to come and go without the need to clutch what we like and destroy what we dislike. It's a soothing quality which steadies mindfulness.

Equanimity is in the slipstream and is balanced on the wide flank by investigation. By this we mean investigation of Dhamma, discovering the teaching for ourselves. By comparison to equanimity, which has been very challenging for me, this factor of investigation comes more naturally. It may have helped that I was always intrigued by the mystery of life. Where did I come from? Why am I here? What's life all about? I enjoy learning, and the notion that I can learn the Dhamma for myself from my own experience still thrills me.

One teaching we can investigate during meditation is the teaching around *anicca*. We can take an interest in the start and end of each breath, each footstep, each sensation. This draws us from our usual preoccupation with facts and concepts, which give the world a sense of solidity and predictability. The study of *anicca* engages us with the more fluid sense of reality as it appears at our sense doors.

We can also study the other characteristics of existence, *anattā* and *dukkha*. I'm especially drawn to the whole question of *dukkha*—to see can I pinpoint any source of stress, suffering, or dissatisfaction in my experience.

To take one example of working with aversion. At one level, I might know I'm fed up with all this meditation business, wishing it was over and I could do something active and worthwhile. There may also be a strong resistance to acknowledging this, never mind investigating it deeper. That first step is often the hardest—acknowledging.

If I can get over that and simply note, "OK, this is bad humour, disinterest, not wanting to meditate," then the factor of investigation starts to kick in. How is this bad humour felt in my body? Is it my jaw, my stomach? My attention would be drawn towards the unpleasant sensations and I begin to get warily curious about them. Are they stinging? Are they aching? Is it tightness I'm feeling?

I might also begin to catch fleeting glimpses of pleasant sensations and sense the tight grip with which I'm holding onto these. I might realise that the pleasantness gives a sense of self, insisting, "This is mine, I need this," or some variation on this theme. The unpleasant sensations and associated bad humour loosen a bit to show an underlying fear that my sense of self is being threatened.

By then I'm generally hooked on this present-moment detective story. And if I can maintain mindfulness with all its supporting factors, the crisis always resolves to give me a deeper understanding of how this being I call "me" is composed. With this understanding comes compassion for the stresses and strains around the kernel of goodness at the core of each human being.

This kind of investigation teaches me the truth of *anattā*, not-self. I feel how quickly and automatically I identify with pleasant mind states like clarity, *mettā*, happiness, and how hard it is to admit to unpleasant states like bad humour. Because of delusion, I believe I should be in control of my mind, always able to get myself into some shade of good humour. Again and again I learn that this mind-body complex has a life of its own and that my level of control is very limited.

This is a demonstration of *anattā*—that there's no one in charge of this entity I call "me." It's a very hard truth to digest, but the more often I feel my whole being relax as I let go of trying to control matters, the more persuaded I am that the sense of *anattā* is a very beautiful one.

The investigation also teaches us about *dukkha* and the cause of *dukkha*. Again and again we verify the second noble truth—that *dukkha* results from us wanting things to be different to how they are right now.

Equanimity and investigation make good partners, balancing one another out. When we are equanimous, the mind feels good, steady, balanced, peaceful. Without investigation, that could become a lovely resting place for the mind—a lovely experience but not leading anywhere. But if the factor of investigation is aroused, we get curious about that lovely, balanced steadiness, and often a subtle clinging will be revealed. Perhaps there is self-congratulating going on. "Amn't I wonderful to have such equanimity?"

At last I'm getting somewhere. As those little background whispers of thought are revealed, we may also feel a sense of holding, as if there is a hand in our mind clutching the steadiness and holding on to it. That sense of holding contains tinges of anxiety, fear, and loss. And so the mind may not feel so steady anymore as we feel ourselves grasping the state of equanimity. This turns into an encounter with the hindrance of desire—in this case, desire for an equanimous mind. Although our peaceful meditation is lost, we are on the path, learning how to enjoy equanimity without the pain of clinging to it.

On the other hand, when investigation is very strong, we can be buzzing with excitement, determined to get to the bottom of whatever is intriguing us. Perhaps it's a mind state like judgment, and we get really curious about how this is felt in the body and

mind. If we're not careful, our curiosity can get the better of us, and we're unwittingly putting ourselves under pressure. We can get entangled with the judging mind and start judging ourselves because we can't see things clearly. Once we notice this, we need to try to get back to a more balanced state of mind. So equanimity is our strength here—the ability to persuade ourselves that the lack of clarity is not a big deal, nothing to get worked up about.

Let's look at the final pair now: tranquility and joy. Tranquility, as you can guess, is in the slipstream, calming us down. Joy on the wide flank, urging us on. Tranquility is very much bound up with equanimity. When the mind is balanced and equanimous, the heart feels tranquil, at ease. And tranquility is strengthened when we work skillfully with restlessness.

Tranquility was a late developer for me. As I look back on it, I can see that I was ignoring whatever little suggestions of calm were on offer. They didn't attract my attention, which was zooming in on stronger emotions. I was so intent on solving all my emotional problems that I skipped over those moments of ease. "I'm still plagued by fears and self-doubt. I'm nowhere near enlightenment. What does it matter that there's a moment's peace?" Those moments seemed irrelevant. It took a long time for me to be able to admit: just now, I'm not stressed out. Just now, things are okay. But once I got myself around to noticing what relaxation actually felt like, I started developing a taste for that experience. My determination to solve all my emotional problems dwindled slightly, and to my surprise, some of them solved themselves without me at the helm.

So I would advise you to get curious about ease, to take a real interest, even if it's only momentary, or just marginally easier than normal. The danger is that we judge, "This isn't worth anything, I'm still totally uptight," and so the slightest relaxation is snuffed out immediately. This kind of thinking may be quite prevalent in the West because our culture puts so much emphasis on success. We want to be totally relaxed and floating in the clouds before we can judge ourselves to be any way tranquil. But we can only learn tranquility if we build on whatever small morsels we are offered.

The wonderful thing is that tranquility feels lovely, and so once we tune into it at all, we are naturally interested in developing it. Nowadays I find it can really help me through the storms of emotion to be able to discern any little chink in my armor of tension and to feel the gorgeous sensations that are released when we relax a tight muscle for a moment. This helps me persuade myself to give up on useless battles and make peace with whatever I am sensing as a problem.

Balancing tranquility on the wide flank, we have joy. At times it may be hard to believe, but we can actually get hooked on the present moment and really appreciate and enjoy meditation. This factor is very much linked with investigation. As we investigate, we get interested in our experience, and interest is in itself a form of joy. If you're interested in a book or a film, you are enjoying it. Think how much you enjoy any hobby, even if it's hard work at times.

We can fall into the same trap as with tranquility and expect to feel elated and rapturous whenever this factor is working. But if you ask yourself at times, "Am I interested in this?" I imagine the answer will often be yes. That might help you discern the quality of joy in your meditation.

To strengthen this quality, it also helps to take more interest in pleasant sensations and moods. Sometimes we are so intent on seeing dukkha and its cause that we ignore sources of pleasure, thinking them irrelevant. But the Buddha teaches us about suffering and the end of suffering. So we also need to get curious about pleasure. We need to sensitize ourselves to those fleeting moments when we're not caught up in stress and suffering. These moments are precious and need nurturing. It's so easy for them to be slapped down by the judgmental mind saying, "That's nothing. Think of all my real problems."

Another way we can hinder joy is by being overly fearful of indulging it.

We've heard the teaching around indulging pleasure and want to avoid that mistake, so we shy away from pleasant feelings. But if we're in the present moment rather than lost in thought, there's no danger of indulging. We'll feel the sense of clinging whenever it happens, and that will do its own teaching. It's a mistake to be afraid of indulging joy. What we're actually doing is indulging fear.

So when any suggestion of joy comes along, go for it. We need to let our minds get familiar with this lovely experience. Our minds welcome what they're familiar with and shy away from unfamiliar states. The better we get to know joy, the more easily our mind will find it in the future. It's a win-win situation. You can trust mindfulness to sort out any clinging.

At times you might feel some pleasant tingling sensations in your body. These are a manifestation of joy. Let your attention dwell there so as to strengthen this factor of enlightenment. And if at any stage you sense gladness in your meditation, really let it rip. Relax into the experience and give yourself full permission to enjoy for as long as it lasts.

These last factors of tranquillity and joy make natural partners. Joy energises tranquillity, prevents us slipping off into a nice tranquil sleep. And tranquillity calms joy, preventing it from running off into excitement.

Before I finish, a word of warning. We can easily start beating ourselves up for not feeling all these beautiful factors of mind. When we're going through any of the hindrances, we can feel anything but joyful and equanimous. It needs the faith developed through long practice to trust that these factors are developing as we bear with the turmoil mindfully. Although we can't feel the factors in these situations, they're still contained within awareness. So long as we can maintain mindfulness, they're working away on our behalf, and we'll settle back into our minds and hearts when conditions are right.

As a quick recap on the factors of enlightenment, we have the image of wild geese in flight with their V-shaped formation. Mindfulness is in the lead, supported by three calming factors in the slipstream: concentration, equanimity, and tranquillity. On the wide flank, pushing ahead, we have the three stimulating factors: energy, investigation of Dhamma, and joy.

These qualities of mind and heart are being developed whenever we meditate. Some of these also come to our aid in daily life. Here the Buddha gives another list: the five spiritual faculties.

You'll not be surprised that mindfulness is here again. We slip into autopilot, not noticing anything about our surroundings or our inner life if we're not being mindful. We might be lost in daydreams and worries, not noticing how they're affecting our mood, posture, facial expression, tensions in the body. So first and foremost, we need to wake up, notice that we've been lost in thought, bring ourselves back to the here and now, knowing experience as it's happening. Mindful.

When we're mindful, we'll also be on guard against wrongdoing. If we've got into a heated argument and are shouting and swearing, it's very unlikely that we'll also be mindful—deliberately and consciously choosing to shout and swear. The moment we wake up and notice what we're doing, we'll start to calm down. The very discomfort of the body will deter us from continuing. So mindfulness protects us from going astray in daily life, keeps us on the path.

That's not to say that anger is always unwholesome. There may be occasions when we need to shout and swear. But very often it happens for relatively trivial matters because someone's pushed a button. And in these situations we need to find other ways of

dealing with the energies of anger. Although this is a long and often painful journey, mindfulness is our saving grace, rescuing us from old habits, showing us the potential for change.

Just as in meditation, the balancing pair of energy and concentration support mindfulness in daily life. Energy here includes mental qualities like resolution and determination, as well as whatever physical energy we need to accomplish our goals. We won't give up easily. But of course we can get over-energetic, doggedly following some fixed idea, not open to reason.

Say we've asked some friends around for tea. We decide to bake a cake for them. But everything goes wrong. We don't have any eggs and the local shop is out of eggs, so we have to drive ten miles to get some. Then we find we've run out of sugar and the mixer breaks down. Energy keeps us going, gets us through one problem after another. But we might still be beating eggs when our friends arrive, too frazzled to make them really welcome.

So energy needs to be balanced by concentration. This reminds us that the aim is to have friends to tea. Baking a cake is secondary—grand if it works, but let's focus on the important point: to make our friends welcome. Concentration has a calming effect, keeps us directed, focuses our energies on what is beneficial.

For daily life, we also need the support of faith and wisdom. Faith, Sharon Salzberg tells us, is not something you either have or have not. It's something you do. Faith in the Dhamma means to set your heart upon it.

We start with what can be termed blind faith, accepting the teachings as true even though we have no personal proof. As we practice and begin to see how we create suffering, how mindfulness reduces suffering, our initial blind faith turns to confidence in the teachings and gratitude for having received them. Faith, being a quality of the heart, warms up the teachings for us. We might develop a strong devotion towards the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, become more involved, be inspired to do our bit to support our local Sangha.

There is always the danger of losing ourselves in devotion, idealising the Buddha or a teacher rather than investigating whether the teachings are true in our own experience. Thus faith needs the balance of wisdom.

Wisdom starts with hearing or reading the Dhamma. It goes deeper when we reflect on this, thinking about how it applies to our life. The deepest wisdom comes from our meditation practice, where we experience the teachings as moment-to-moment reality.

The partnership of faith and wisdom is likened to a blind person who is energetic and strong pairing up with someone who is frail and crippled but with keen insight. The blind person symbolises faith, while the frail person symbolises wisdom. Wisdom sees where we want to go but lacks strength on its own. It needs the power and energy of faith to make the journey.

I think of faith and wisdom as a circle surrounding my life. They connect me with the world but also set limits. Within the circle I have energy and concentration, helping me do whatever tasks faith and wisdom have agreed upon. At the very centre is mindfulness, seeing how all this activity relates to my present experience.

I hope this talk has helped you understand the factors of enlightenment and how they relate to the spiritual faculties, which are the qualities we need and can develop in daily life. In both, mindfulness leads the way. Without mindfulness, our natural ability to know what is happening moment after moment, we backslide into old habits that lead to suffering.

To keep mindfulness sharp, it is backed up by concentration, the ability to focus, to rest attention on some aspect of experience. And energy, the willingness to keep on going no matter how hard it is. In daily life, this trio are further supported by faith and wisdom. In meditation, faith and wisdom keep developing with the aid of the twin supports of Dhamma investigation, the drive to see the truth for ourselves, and equanimity, the balance of mind that allows us to put up with what we dislike and resist unnecessary enticements. And their heartfelt expressions: joy, a lively curiosity in moment-to-moment experience, and tranquillity, the quiet ease that comes from sensing that all is well—we're on the path, heading for home.

May we soar like a flock of wild geese to liberation.

CHAPTER 14

First Noble Truth: There is Dukkha - read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · 45 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk read by Finola O'Siochru, Noírín Sheahan presents a profound exploration of the First Noble Truth from the Buddha's initial teaching in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). Rather than viewing the Buddhist focus on suffering as pessimistic, she reframes it as the gateway to genuine happiness—the Buddha's great insight that fully understanding dukkha leads to complete freedom from it.*
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> *The talk examines dukkha in its three classical forms. Dukkha-dukkha encompasses the obvious sufferings of illness, death, and loss. Anicca-dukkha arises from the transient nature of experience—the subtle dissatisfaction when holidays end, books finish, or pleasant moments fade. Through vivid personal examples including walking meditation, breathing, and even a transformative encounter with a bowl of soup on retreat, Sheahan illustrates how we habitually avoid endings and chase new beginnings, becoming addicted to activity as escapism. Anattā-dukkha relates to our lack of control and the constructed nature of self, explored through the Buddhist teaching that the sense of self emerges depending on conditions, particularly when we cling to pleasant or unpleasant feelings.*
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> *The practical heart of this teaching lies in using everyday experiences—each breath, footstep, and meal—as opportunities to investigate impermanence and not-self. By making peace with minor forms of dukkha, we develop resources for life's inevitable major challenges. The talk offers guidance on working with fear of the unknown, the boundaries between self and other, and learning to rest in moments when no sense of self is needed, ultimately pointing toward liberation through understanding.*

The talks for the rest of the week will centre on the Four Noble Truths, which was the first teaching the Buddha gave after his enlightenment. He described these as his own insights into the nature of suffering and the process by which it is eliminated. When he gave this teaching, he added an injunction with each truth. These bring the teaching alive for us. We can live the Four Noble Truths.

So what are these truths the Buddha wants us to live by? The first is that life involves dukkha. The injunction here is to fully understand dukkha. The second truth states that desire is the cause of dukkha. The Buddha asks us to let go of desire. The third truth is

the good news: that there is an end to dukkha. The injunction is to realize the end of dukkha. Finally, we have more good news—that there is a way to the end of dukkha, namely the Noble Eightfold Path. The injunction is to follow this path.

Let's start with the first noble truth, the truth of dukkha. For people with only a superficial interest in Buddhism, this can be off-putting. It's easy to deride Buddhists as pessimists because of the focus on suffering. Our culture more often encourages us to ignore the unsavoury aspects of life. We don't like to discuss death, for example.

Just this morning, I was listening to a radio interview with four people who had lost their spouses. One man who had obviously had a very close relationship with his wife said his only regret was that they never discussed her death. They both knew she was dying but couldn't acknowledge it openly. He sensed her growing distant from him in her last weeks because of this gap between them. When asked why he didn't broach the subject, he said it was because he didn't know how. They had both tried so hard to be optimistic and positive, and he didn't know how to break through that pattern.

I think this is a good illustration of our cultural difficulty around opening to death and other unwelcome aspects of life. We just don't know how to open. We build up habits of optimism and cheerfulness to try to buoy ourselves up, but then get stuck in these habits and lose touch with our deeper reality. His regrets around not having spoken to his wife about her impending death also shows the trap of our focus on the positive. It prevents the development and expression of a love which transcends our wishes for how life should be.

It is ironic that the path to happiness starts with an understanding of unhappiness, but this was the Buddha's great insight. Once he fully understood the nature of suffering, he became completely free from suffering. He was untroubled, quiet, at ease and content throughout all the vicissitudes of life, and even as he died a painful death from food poisoning. He was open and unsentimental about the fact that he was dying, and not a bit impressed with his cousin Ananda for weeping at the news. With characteristic pragmatism, he reminded Ananda that all worldly pleasures fade away. He was willing and able to teach right up to the moment of death, leaving his followers with the words: "All conditioned things have the nature to decay. Strive diligently for your liberation."

He described dukkha as coming in three flavours. Firstly, there is dukkha dukkha, which is what we normally recognize as suffering: illness, pain, death, redundancy, financial ruin, old age, bereavement and so on. Then there is anicca dukkha, resulting

from the transient nature of life. And finally there is anatta dukkha, the existential angst we can feel because we don't have any meaningful degree of control over our lives.

Dukkha dukkha is the most difficult for us to deal with. We go through shock, anger, grief and so on before coming to terms with major life challenges. Dukkha dukkha is inescapable. Even if we live a charmed life, we will someday have to die. And if we're lucky enough to have a long life, we'll have to negotiate our way through the various humiliations of old age along the way. For many people, this dukkha dukkha is their only encounter with the limitations of life, and they can be really thrown off course by the death of a loved one, for example. The incidence of depression increases with age, and the risk of suicide is highest in the elderly.

As a way of preparing ourselves for the inevitable, we can practice on the milder forms of dukkha relating to anicca and anatta. Let's look at anicca dukkha first—the dissatisfaction we feel because of the transitory nature of life. We have loads of examples of this in our daily life. Take a holiday, for example. We can get quite excited at the prospect, looking through the brochures, checking out the hotels, booking time off work. Then we're on holiday. It can take a day or two to settle and relax. If we're lucky, we'll enjoy ourselves and appreciate our stay. But how quickly that final day comes round when we have to pack and go home again.

And there's still the hotel bill to be paid. Sometimes we're energised and refreshed by the holiday, chatting to our colleagues and friends about what we've seen. But eventually the gloss wears off and we're back to our daily routine again.

That's the essence of anicca dukkha—the dissatisfaction we feel because the good times just don't last forever. It can be quite subtle, and we might not feel it as a major problem. "Just part of life," we say philosophically. But the Buddha's advice is not to dismiss the problem so readily. Take an interest in the ending and aftermath of the holiday as much as the exciting and relaxing times before and during it. We often find ways to ignore the slight downer at the end—planning the next holiday, for example.

The problem with ignoring the endings of all our happy times is that we get addicted to activity, or other forms of escapism, as a means of keeping our spirits up. We look to the future, to the next exciting thing in life, to keep our mind off the fact that something we cared for has just ended. If we persist in this—keeping ourselves buoyed up and cheerful at all costs—then we will have no resources to deal with the inevitable dukkha dukkha when it comes.

I first noticed anicca dukkha as I was reading a book. I was always a great reader and would never go anywhere without a book for company—at the hairdresser's, on the bus, during coffee. So long as I had a book, I was happy. I was pretty well addicted to reading, you could say.

And then one day, I suddenly became aware that the number of pages on the right, the unread pages, was less than the number of pages on the left. I felt quite depressed by this. From then on, I began to dread turning each page. When I finished the book, I felt a real downer and also a sense of shame. I was suddenly aware that the pleasure from reading was transitory, that it ended with the book, and therefore couldn't satisfy me at any depth. I was ashamed of having devoted so much of my life to this false god. This was quite a shock for me, and it was years before I would read a book again.

If we look closely, we see everything is in transit. It arises, shows itself for a moment, before passing away again. Take any meal—lunch, for example. It can be hard work getting this started. We may have to do some shopping and then the cooking. At least we're buoyed up through this by the prospect of lunch. Then comes the nice bit: eating. And if there are others with us, this can be a lovely part of the day, a time to relax and chat. But how quickly it ends! And there's still the washing up to be done.

Although we prefer to fudge around endings, distracting ourselves with whatever is next on the horizon, the wiser approach is to use this opportunity to get to know dukkha. So how do you experience the ending of lunch? See how you feel before lunch and how eager you are for the first bite. Does your mood lift as your stomach fills? And then the ending. Are you still so enthusiastic when the plate shows those last messy smears of food? Or do you just feel you have to get the job done? Can you rest with whatever emotions might surface as you swallow the last bite?

I remember on the final day of a retreat at Gaia House how much I was looking forward to the evening bowl of soup—and it was delicious. But as the bowl emptied, my world actually seemed to fall apart. I wanted that soup to last forever. It seemed to hold all the goodness of life for me. How could I let it go? What would there be left in the world? A big gap yawned open inside me. For a moment I was very frightened, and then grief surfaced. The grief was actually a relief, and I began to acknowledge other losses in life. This was a good illustration of anicca dukkha for me, and how opening to it mindfully helps us work with the inescapable dukkha of life and death.

Each breath and footstep teaches us about anicca. Which do you prefer—the in-breath or the out-breath? Do you like to hold your breath? When I am anxious, I tend to gasp at the start of the in-breath, and my confidence grows as I inhale. But then comes the moment when I have to let it all go again. I do my best to ignore the out-breath as I

look forward to that moment when I can snatch another ray of hope that comes with the in-breath. This is anicca dukkha. Anxiety is prompting me to hold on to what I enjoy —the sense of possibility and hope that comes with each in-breath. But anxiety will not let me relax with the out-breath.

Let go of hope? No way!

Nowadays when anxiety strikes, I can usually let myself feel the fear of letting go and find a thin thread of trust that pulls me through. This comes from moments during previous out-breaths when I saw that letting go of hope does not mean the end of all hope. It simply releases hope to do its proper job of reassuring us deep down that all is well. In the words of Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

What about the footstep? Do you prefer the lifting, the moving, or the placing?

At first I could only sense the lifting. It thrilled me. I had a sense of soaring with the angels. I didn't notice anything about the rest of the step, so intent was I on looking forward to the next time I could lift my foot. As time went on, I also became fascinated by the moving. This was more wonderment than the soaring of angels. Could I feel anything? What was I feeling? How did I know my foot was moving?

But the ending of the footstep was another matter entirely. I felt uncertain, unsteady as the foot came downwards, searching for the floor. And when the toe touched down, the lightness of that touch seemed totally unsatisfactory. Even with my full weight on the floor, I felt unhappy until that lovely moment of the heel rising, the foot peeling off the floor, when all my woes would end for another few moments.

What all this shows me is how addicted I am to new beginnings and how I prefer to ignore the uncertainty that comes with endings. I can see this at other levels of life. I love springtime but find it hard to appreciate the lovely colours of the fall because they represent the end of summer. I'm a morning person. I love the purity of dawn, whereas I easily get agitated in the evenings. I can be good at getting projects going, exploring new territory, but find it hard to see them through to the end.

I used to do quite a lot of hill walking, and to my surprise one day, I found I preferred the uphill climb to the downhill stroll. Going upwards, I had a sense of hope, a promise of some reward to come. Coming down, on the other hand, was literally that—a comedown. There was nothing to anticipate.

The years of meditation practice have smoothed me out a bit. Just last year I noticed to my surprise that I was enjoying the ending of the footstep. It felt satisfying to put my foot down on the floor and let it take all my weight. A little bit of progress at last.

The study of anicca has also shown me how much delusion I can have about new beginnings. The sense of anticipation, hope, and expectancy can rocket me into a new venture, all excited and thrilled and knowing this is going to be wonderful and that I'll be well able for the challenge. But when I eventually hit the ground, I'm looking around wondering how I got here and what I'm supposed to be doing. Nowadays I'm better at noticing all those exciting feelings of expectancy and anticipation—I steady myself on the launch pad, wait a bit to try to get some bearings before take-off.

I've noticed that there can be a lot of fear around new beginnings. Each one is a venture into the unknown. And I sense how my eagerness to start is a reaction to that fear, wanting to get rid of that scary unknown by filling it with activity.

Endings too can frighten us with a sense of the unknown. Take my life-and-death bowl of soup after the retreat, for example. That ending scared me so. Again, it was fear of the unknown. The soup was known. How could it just end? Can what we know actually disappear, become unknown?

Working with the unknown is such a big part of our meditation practice. As we are drawn into the present moment, we lose touch with the certainties sewn into our stories and sense the shifting sands beneath. What do we really know? Just sensations and feelings, really, and these are shifting and changing so fast it's hard to claim any real knowledge of them.

While my body contacts the sensations, my mind is drawn towards a mental image I am making in my efforts to make sense of the experience. I imagine a big space in which the sensations are manifesting. It puzzles me, this space. Sensations seem to twinkle like stars in its vast emptiness.

Now, what can we say about that emptiness, that space where sensations appear and into which they disappear? Not a lot. Nothing, perhaps. It can still frighten me to sense myself so close to such a vast unknown.

Fear projects all kinds of monsters into it. But despite my best efforts at suspicion, fear, and even panic, all I can say really is it has never lived up to my expectations. It has never, ever threatened me in any way. I am more and more willing to trust that it is truly and deeply non-harming.

In ordinary life, the unknown appears in our minds when we think about the future, the next moment. It's behind the door before we open it. Thoughts also connect us with the unknown. I think of a friend and wish them well. But where are they right now? I might have a nice image of them sitting in a garden, but ultimately I have to admit I don't know. How are they feeling? I haven't a clue.

The amount we don't know far outweighs what we do know—where and how our friends and family are, what's going to happen tomorrow, next year, in twenty years. So we have to get used to the unknown if we're going to have any peace. Anicca, with its beginnings and endings, provides the perfect opportunity.

I've been describing the difficulties we experience due to anicca, but the truth of anicca can also be experienced as joyous. The flow of sensations as the foot peels off the floor can be exhilarating. The slight sways of the body as we walk can be fascinating. The smooth ripple of breath can be relaxing. We can watch and wonder as sensations and feelings stream through consciousness like water through a sieve. We can feel truly alive in the shifting flux.

And when I work through my latest bout of fear and anxiety to make peace with the unknown, then it is delightful to let myself relax and let the breath come and go of its own accord, let emotions emerge and develop and fade away. The transience is thrilling. It's perfectly okay not to know what will happen next.

Intertwined with anicca is the experience of anatta, usually translated as not-self. This is a difficult truth to come to terms with. Our minds are deeply conditioned to think in terms of me and you and him and her, and we find this shift in perspective—to not-me, not-I, not-self—quite perplexing. The negativity that can come with being perplexed—frustration, confusion, anxiety—is one manifestation of anatta dukkha.

To my mind, the kernel of fear that forms anicca dukkha is fear of the unknown. By comparison, I think much of the dukkha associated with anatta revolves around fear of not understanding. That can make us feel like small children at school, feeling stupid and ashamed because we don't understand our lessons, frightened the teacher and the other children will jeer at us.

So look out for these kinds of emotions when you're exploring anatta—even now as you listen to this talk, for example. If they surface, see if you can model the kind of teacher children love: patient, encouraging, prepared to stop the lessons to have some fun. Especially notice and resist any tendency to put yourself down, hate yourself be-

cause of how slowly this teaching is sinking in, or judge yourself as stupid. If that happens, it's definitely time to stop the anatta lesson and focus instead on those jeering children or teachers that have popped up in your imagination to taunt you.

Back to the anatta lesson now. What do we mean when we say "I am"? It easily trots off our lips. I am happy. I am cold. I am an engineer. I am meditating. A step closer to the truth of anatta would be to say there is a being who is happy, cold, and so on, and by some magic this being's experience and life story are known. It's so tempting to add "by me"—to say this being's experience and life story are known by me.

Let's try to bring this closer to the truth of anatta. There is a concept of me, myself, I, who knows this being. Our concepts are mental constructions derived from our perceptions of the world. That's essentially what the self is, according to the Buddha: a mental construction.

Perceptions are the mind's attempts to make sense of all the data it receives. We see a certain pattern of yellow colours and perceive a buttercup. We hear a jangling sound and perceive a doorbell. One teacher likens perception to a mental filing cabinet. Each bit of sensory information is put into its correct file. The ability to perceive helps us simplify the vast amount of data bombarding our senses each moment. If we didn't have our filing cabinet, the paper would be strewn all over the room. It would be total confusion. We couldn't function. Babies haven't yet learned to categorise experience in this way, and so have endless fun exploring their little world. Everything is new.

As adults, we learn to ignore much of our sense input, as it's so quickly stowed away into its correct file, and we gladly believe that much of it can be labelled as unimportant.

The ability to perceive is wonderful. We couldn't negotiate our way through the world without this simplification. But it's important to remember that it's a mental classification, a form of data processing that we do. Our perceptions are not inherent to the world but a construction in our minds.

Our perceptions can be wrong. We've probably all had the experience of mistaking a stranger for a friend because of some trick of the light. For a brief moment we see our friend. We may even stop to say hello. Then the scene changes and a stranger's face comes into view. The incoming data went into the wrong file. We can get quite a shock.

Sometimes the opposite happens. Recently I was waiting at a station when my eyes were for some reason attracted towards a strange woman's face and I found myself staring at her. She stared back. It took a second to recognise a friend. We both started giggling. We hadn't been expecting to see one another there and the raw data got misclassified as the perception "stranger."

I had a very striking example of this one time on retreat here at Satipanya when I came into the meditation room. It was the original room before the extension, and some of you may remember that Bhante kept the prayer plant on its tall table just beside the side door. The pair are now in the dining room, so look out for this misperception if you stray into the dining room at night. The table is draped with a red cloth. There was no one in the shrine room and I crossed over in the semi-darkness and switched on the light by the shrine. As I turned back, eyes downcast, I glimpsed the red cloth brushing the floor and in an instant my mind built up a life-size image of Bhante standing beside the door. In my mind I saw Bhante, gave a startled jump as I hadn't heard him come in, felt embarrassed at my jumpiness, and was about to apologise before I realised I was about to address a pot plant.

Our perceptions are our best attempt to make sense of the world. They're influenced by our memories and expectations. They can be wrong. So it is with the perception of self. It can be wrong.

At times it's an appropriate perception. It helps make sense of the world. This is true in much of our daily lives. This being I call "me" is staying in the library, so needs to get herself there at times. If I didn't have an ability to perceive myself as different to others, who knows where I would end up. But this perception is not the ultimate truth, according to the Buddha. There are times where a perception of not-self is more helpful.

Take those times when we are avidly watching the flow of sensations and feelings. Then things start to feel sticky. We tighten around pleasant feelings, trying to hold on to them. The flow gets choked up. If we can relax and let go, sensations and feelings flow more easily again. If you look carefully, you will also notice that a sense of self arises when things get sticky and is released when sensations are flowing.

This is a teaching on the truth of anattā—that the self arises depending on conditions. The particular condition needed to generate a sense of self is a pleasant or unpleasant feeling we cling to. We try to hold, amplify and prolong the pleasant; we try to get rid of the unpleasant.

If you look closely, the perception of self is associated with the pleasant feeling of control. We love to feel in control. It means we can do what we want. We're the boss. We especially want to feel in control of ourselves—our bodies, emotions, thoughts. We want to be in good humour when we're on holiday. We want to think positive when we're going for an interview. We want our bodies to be able to move and function normally. When we can't meet these expectations, we can feel quite threatened.

Our language actually contains a hint of anattā when we describe these times as "I'm not myself today," or "She wasn't like herself at all," or "He was beside himself with rage."

What's actually happening here? When we look closely we see that when things are going well for us, there is a pleasant feeling which we perceive as "me" and believe to be the control centre for our body, mind and life.

When things go badly, unpleasant feelings are generated which we push away, thinking "this isn't me." We're frightened by the fact that things are going against our wishes, and especially when we notice the unpleasant sensations and associated feelings are also manifesting in our bodies. Where is our precious control centre now? If you look carefully, you will find it's boxed into the opposition to the way things are. Even though the whole world can look black and scary, there is still a tiny, pleasant feeling of holding onto control. So long as I can say no to what I don't want, I can persuade myself I'm still in control.

In general, the feeling of self accompanies any sense of effort. Any time you feel relatively peaceful in meditation, see whether there is a strong sense of self. Compare that to the times you feel yourself struggling. The hindrances come with a strong sense of self. When I'm struggling with physical pain, I feel my body straining away from the painful area, as if it's trying to divide itself in two—the painful part, sensed as "not me," and the part which pulls away, sensed as "me." As I make peace with the pain, that sense of division subsides. Thus, physical pain provides one way for us to explore the truth of anatta.

All this can be very bewildering. Am I here? Am I not here? Do I exist? It can be quite frightening. Our sense of self is very precious, and we can feel threatened by thoughts of not-self. We imagine we will be annihilated. The Buddha refused to answer questions of the type: Do I exist? Do I not exist? Will I exist after death? Patiently, he repeated his insight that the sense of self emerges to fulfil our desires.

I think of the sense of self as a psychophysical mechanism that energises and sculpts my mind and body to help me get what I want and get rid of what I don't want. But when we are resting, when there isn't any enticing food to be found or any threats to cope with, we don't need central coordination. All the cells and organs work away themselves, just as they do in sleep. Unless we experience desire or aversion, no sense of self is formed. At these times, we often have no interest in the question "Do I exist?" It seems irrelevant. Then something disturbs our peaceful flow, and suddenly we're all hyped up, very sure of our existence.

One reason why we don't easily make peace with anatta is because we don't notice the absence of our sense of self during those peaceful times when there are no strong desires driving us. So we don't take those chances to explore and learn to appreciate the experience and perception of not-self.

Why don't we notice the experience of not-self? Although the thought of anatta is perplexing and we find it hard to imagine the possibility of existing without a sense of self, ironically the experience of anatta is quite mundane and doesn't attract our attention. The absence of self is not a particularly interesting experience. Our world doesn't fall apart. Our bodies and minds function just fine. One teacher says that the mind state of not-self is far more prevalent than the mind state of self. It's just that it's so unobtrusive, so ordinary, that we don't notice it. I find it comforting to reflect on that. It helps to alleviate the fear we often feel during the investigation of anatta.

We can also investigate anatta as it shows up in our relationship with others. Normally we locate ourselves within our bodies and other people outside. But these perceptions can dissolve when we take another into our hearts in the practice of metta. Again, we don't usually notice this, as the experience does not trouble us. Only trouble calls attention. But it can be interesting to explore this when you feel a friendship. Is there a clear sense of separation between you and the other?

By contrast, the boundary between self and other gets amplified by enmity and hatred. When these surface, my face will often be tightening, my jaws locked. A strong sense of "me" fuels the tension, clenches my jaws. A mental image of the other person is projected around my head. As I let go of angry thoughts, their image blurs and I'm left with a vague but threatening sense of otherness beyond the borders of my body. The world seems to be divided into me, barricaded into my jaws and face, fiercely opposed to the other occupying the space around.

Nowadays, I use the note "not me" to describe that sense of otherness. This stills my mind and increases curiosity. What is this entity I'm battling with? My mind pushes against the boundary, demanding to know what is out there.

But nothing clarifies, and my attention reverts to my body, the breath rising and falling. In time my face and jaws relax, and the boundary between me and not me blurs. The space around me, once so threatening, seeps inwards, dissolving the sense of enmity. The image of the other person re-emerges, and I begin to see the situation from their point of view. A sense of understanding grows.

Exploring our relationship with others in this way helps us come to terms with the truth of anattā. Perceptions of self and not-self emerge and dissolve in line with feelings of enmity and friendship. Whenever we start thinking about anattā, we will often be stimulating a sense of self, as the desire to know and understand the truth is operating. Ironically, this desire leads to a sense of self who needs to understand this truth. So it's quite a challenge to combine reflection on the teaching with experiential investigation. We need patience. We can also bring those emotional reactions into the field of investigation whenever they are stimulated. We might sense anattā in our lack of control over those emotions.

Beware also of judging the sense of self as somehow inferior to the sense of not-self. Time and again the Buddha asks us to look after ourselves wisely, to treasure our human life with its opportunity to free ourselves from suffering. There are many wise desires we should fulfil in order to look after ourselves and practice meditation. The desire to learn the Dhamma would be one, and then the multitude of desires involved in putting this into practice—the desire to come on retreat, the desire to get the bus in order to come on retreat, the desire to get out of bed in order to get the bus, and so on. Many of these desires will need some effort to fulfil, and a sense of self is conjured up to channel our energies into that effort. That's fine. That's the way the human organism accomplishes things. So a sense of self is nothing to be ashamed of.

Ajahn Thanissaro, in his very helpful book on anattā entitled *Selves and Not-Self*, says that sometimes the perception of self is the wiser one, and sometimes the perception of not-self is the wiser one. He adds that as our practice deepens, we get better at discerning which perception is more appropriate for each situation. To marshal ourselves for actions we deem worthy, the sense of self should be encouraged and nourished. We can search for any good feelings associated with thoughts like "I can," "I will," and take delight in these as a little treasure trove to help us enjoy work and get us through any challenges.

When we've accomplished our task or feel the need for a rest along the way, we can sit back and invite any dukkha stirred up by the activity to manifest. Sometimes, as the struggle with dukkha wanes, we can let the perception of "not me, not mine" sink in to

remind us that we don't always have to be acting and accomplishing, that the world can survive quite well without us—that even we ourselves can survive quite well without anyone at the helm.

I want to finish tonight by recapping the first noble truth: that life involves dukkha. The Buddha asks us to fully understand dukkha. We can explore it in three forms. Dukkha-dukkha involves the major suffering of our lives, which we cannot escape. To prepare ourselves for this, we can study dukkha's milder forms. Anicca-dukkha manifests especially at beginnings and endings, and is even contained within the minutiae. Every breath, footstep, and meal present us with a lesson on transience. Anattā-dukkha shows up at the limits to our control, at the boundary of me and other, and even within ourselves as we struggle with sensations and feelings we would prefer not to own.

The exploration of dukkha involves finding our way through the hindrances that block our view of truth. As we make our peace with each hindrance, we also come to terms with the limits to our knowledge and understanding. We feel more at ease in a world which is continually slipping through our fingers, beyond our tiny radius of control.

May we and all beings come to understand dukkha and thereby be liberated from all suffering.

CHAPTER 15

Second and Third Noble Truths: Cause and Cessation of Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · 47 min

In this comprehensive retreat talk, Nóirín Sheahan offers a detailed exploration of the Second and Third Noble Truths through the lens of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination). She guides practitioners through each of the twelve links—from avijjā (ignorance) through saṅkhārā, viññāṇa, nāma-rūpa, the six sense bases, contact, vedanā, taṇhā, upādāna, bhava, jāti, to jarāmaraṇa and dukkha—using accessible analogies including a garden where seeds of unwholesome tendencies sprout through the soil of ignorance.

The talk emphasizes vedanā (feeling) as the crucial intervention point where mindfulness can stop the wheel from turning toward suffering. Sheahan draws from personal experience to illustrate how we can observe emotions dissolving through mindful awareness, watching the links of clinging, becoming, and birth fade as we maintain steady attention. She explores how the three root defilements—greed, hatred, and delusion—each find their outlets through pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings respectively.

Particularly valuable is her extended reflection on the Third Noble Truth and cultivating appreciation for absence—the cooling of Nibbāna. She offers practical contemplations including noticing mind states of non-greed and non-hatred, appreciating the ending of hindrances, and the practice of renunciation as creating precious space. Drawing on her own experience with voice loss, she demonstrates how what appears as loss can reveal unexpected peace, encouraging practitioners to trust their underlying simplicity and natural ease.

Tonight I'm going to talk about the second and third noble truths.

The second truth states that desire is the cause of dukkha, and the injunction is to let go of desire. The third truth states that there is an end to dukkha, with the injunction to realize this for ourselves. These truths manifest more clearly as we learn to experience the twelve links in the process that leads to dukkha, described in the Wheel of Dependent Origination. Each link depends on all the previous links having been made. We chant these twelve steps every morning.

It all starts with avijja, usually translated as ignorance. We often hear that word as an insult, but that's not what is intended here. Instead, it means we don't fully understand what causes suffering. One interpretation of this teaching is to see it happening

over multiple lifetimes, with each life influencing the next. It's also possible to see the wheel turning again and again within our lifetime, our incomplete understanding of the Dhamma leading us into dukkha at many stages in life. We can even see it turning within the minutiae that we study in meditation practice. Each breath, each footstep, each mood, emotion, thought—to the extent that these emerge from avijja, they result in dukkha.

Bhante stresses that avijja is a blameless ignorance. We didn't create ourselves in this ignorant state, so we're not to blame for our predicament. At heart, we are innocents. Most of us will admit to avijja. Even if we've studied the Dhamma and are convinced by the argument that greed leads to suffering, we can happily scoff an ice cream, telling ourselves we'll practice renunciation tomorrow. And when someone pushes our buttons, we still find ourselves reacting, despite the fact that we've heard and read countless teachings on the benefits of equanimity. Once we fully understand the teachings, ignorance will be eliminated and the wheel will no longer get a chance to turn.

In the meantime, however, avijja allows sankaras to emerge. Sankaras are the drives which push us into and through our lives. These include greed, hatred, and delusion—the strong forces which propel us towards dukkha. We also have beautiful sankaras, for example metta, which means love or goodwill, as well as all the factors of enlightenment and spiritual faculties. In their purest form, these are not linked with avijja but with wisdom. Thus, they do not cause the wheel to turn. They don't propel us into dukkha. It's only the sankaras related to greed, hatred, and delusion that turn the wheel.

So far, we have ignorance and an unskillful sankara beginning to roll the wheel. In order to exercise their driving power, they need to become conscious. To be conscious is to know experience, to hear sounds, feel body sensations. If we're unconscious, we have no awareness of what's going on. Consciousness is often likened to a screen on which a movie is projected. The story of our lives is displayed on the screen of consciousness. In this case, consciousness has been hijacked by a sankara rooted in ignorance. The Buddha gives this form of consciousness the name vijnana.

The drive now operating through consciousness wants to play a particular movie on the screen. A sankara of greed might want a romantic movie with lots of food and sex, while a sankara of ill-will would prefer a violent movie. A sankara of delusion just wants to control the projector. It wants to play a movie within the movie, to be the producer, director, and central star of all the movies.

For consciousness to manifest in the world, we need both body and mind. Our bodies are part of the physical world of matter. Our minds inhabit the world of thought and imagination. The pair are termed nama-rupa and form the fourth link in the wheel. Rupa gives the three previous links physical reality, which is felt and recognized in our mind. From this, we can see our emotional life as having bodily as well as mental components. Avijja and sankara become conscious and can then express themselves through body and mind.

Let's go back to our gardening analogy that we used for the hindrances. The soil is avijja, ignorance. It contains seeds of unwholesome sankaras. These can grow up to be hindrances if they can work their way through the next links. The seed germinates in consciousness. If you've watched seeds germinate, you will know that two shoots start to emerge, one growing downwards to become the root system, the other growing upwards towards the light. This makes for a neat analogy with the subdivision of consciousness into nama-rupa once it comes under the influence of avijja and sankara.

The sankara now has almost all the apparatus needed to make trouble for us. It just needs to decide which of our senses to work through: the tactile sensory system that runs throughout our bodies, or the auditory system ready to receive sounds, or the visual system, taste, smell, or our sixth sense, which is the mind with its feelings, perceptions, moods, emotions, and thoughts. These sense bases form the fifth link in the wheel. Working through nama-rupa, consciousness can manifest through any of these systems.

Now our sankhara is ready to sprout into the world. Say, for example, it was a seed of greed. It can now look out greedily through our eyes. It can search the mind for happy memories or exciting plans. Similarly for all the other senses. In our gardening analogy, our seed has found six channels—perhaps six little gaps between stones—through which it can sprout up above ground.

This brings us to the sixth link in the wheel: sense contact. A new bit of sense data impacts on our psychophysical system. In our experience, all of the first six links arise simultaneously. We don't experience avijja on its own, for example, or the avijja-sankhara combination. It's only when these meet with the world as it impacts on our senses that we become conscious of all six links. We can sense these working in combination to colour our experience at any moment. We might recognise the sankhara of ill-will, for example, and the way it inhabits our body—narrowing our eyes, perhaps, as well as our mind. Maybe we feel angry. We might sense some slight uncertainty along with this, or else a bull-headed determination to ignore all obstacles—manifestations of avijja.

The fact that we are aware of anything is due to consciousness, so we can trace all of the first six links in our moment-to-moment experience. I had a good experience of this one time during walking meditation. I was quite content until someone came into the room making a lot of noise. I could have sworn the room got darker. Because of mindfulness I could see that the darkening was internal, in my mind, but I was struck at how vividly this was projected into the outside world, as if the sun had gone behind a cloud.

By now we have come halfway around the wheel. From sense contact onwards, the process occurs sequentially. Let's say the new bit of data was a sound. As soon as we detect the sound, our cognitive processes go into action, opening the filing cabinet of perception to try to classify it. What the sankhara needs is to have the sound classified as a threat or an opportunity for pleasure. So cognition compares the sound with those it has previously recognised as threats, such as a loud bang, and opportunities, such as the jingle of the ice cream van. It also compares with the myriad familiar sounds—like birdsong or distant traffic—which are unimportant in terms of this sankhara's survival.

The new sound can be classified anywhere on a very wide scale: from red alert, major danger, to minor irritation, through unimportant, to mildly pleasant, to wonderful opportunity not to be missed. This classification gives a hedonic value to the sound. If you are familiar with this teaching, you'll recognise that what I'm getting at here is vedana—the recognition of any sense contact as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Vedana, usually translated as feeling, forms the seventh link in the chain leading from ignorance to dukkha. Vedana is arguably the most important link for us to recognise because we can stop the wheel turning at this point. If we can recognise unpleasant sounds, sensations, and so forth without reacting, no dukkha is generated. Using our gardening analogy, the shoot got its first bit of sunlight and has turned green, so it can be seen by the gardener of mindfulness. So far it has been concealed underground and we couldn't influence it, but at this point mindfulness can see the shoot and uproot the weed.

Without mindfulness, our system automatically reacts to vedana. If the sound had been classified as neutral—neither a threat nor an opportunity—our system screens it out. Consciousness barely registers the sound and it's quickly forgotten. This is an example of neutral vedana and the reaction of delusion: ignoring most of our experience, only barely conscious of our environment. This isn't the same as letting go of the sound mindfully. It's an act of ignoring, a form of suppression. The sound isn't allowed to get any attention. If we were to look more closely at such sounds, we might find judgments

like "unimportant" or "boring" backing up the neutral classification. This is due to the work of our sankhara seed, jealously guarding consciousness so that the screen will only play a movie it enjoys.

On the other hand, if the sound was recognised as our favourite music, this will be classified as an opportunity for pleasure—pleasant vedana. Our system will be stimulated to perk up. We listen avidly. This is the reaction of desire, our system's first step in getting what it wants. When desire is strong, it can be felt as a strong flow of energy in the body and a focusing effect in the mind—the mind starting to zoom in on whatever it wants, magnifying this in consciousness.

Now let's say the sound was a loud bang. Cognition classifies this as a red alert and our whole system vibrates with shock, waking us up to the danger. This is the fight-or-flight response, and hormones may be released to stimulate and energise us. We start to tense up as unpleasant sensations prolong and amplify the original red alert response. This is the reaction of aversion—our system's first step in trying to cope with danger. Aversion is actually another form of desire: the desire to get rid of what we dislike.

As we bring our attention to the sensations of breathing, we can experience the three links of contact, vedana, and any reactions of desire or aversion.

Sense contact reveals the rising and falling sensations. Then there is the cognition of these as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. So far we have two links: contact and feeling. It is very beneficial to rest attention here and learn to differentiate these two from desire.

We feel desire as a disturbance that quickly turns the wheel towards dukkha. This gives a visceral illustration of the second noble truth—that desire is the cause of suffering. When we sense the disturbing effect of desire, we can at times be persuaded to relax and let go. We feel the benefit as deeper tranquility.

Sometimes our system oscillates between the tranquility afforded by letting the wheel stop at vedana and little jabs of desire that lead to dukkha. At such times our system is reinforcing its understanding of the second and third noble truths: that desire is the cause of suffering, and that letting go of desire brings an end to suffering.

If we're not being mindful, the wheel continues inexorably towards dukkha. The next link is termed clinging or attaching. We become attached, and attachment brings up a sense of self to protect and guard our position. If we're mindful, we can feel this happening.

Let's look at how a sense of self might manifest as a result of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling.

Say we get a compliment. Lots of lovely feelings may manifest as a result. You might feel energised. There may be a sense of expanding, growing taller, as well as a sense of power and control. I like Gregory Kramer's description of this as "puffing up."

On the other hand, suppose you're waiting at a bus stop, just idling the time away. You're vaguely aware of your body, the passing traffic, and the scene around you, but not interested in these. Instead, you're planning the rest of your day after the bus comes. Here we have an example of how sankhara can feed on neutral feelings. The incoming sense data cannot satisfy its needs, and so this is suppressed. Instead, the seed sprouts through the channel of the mind. Here it finds the excitement and pleasure it desires in the ability of the mind to imagine and plan.

Do you remember Walter Mitty? If you read the story or saw the movie, you will recognise him as a caricature of delusion, pouncing on every idle moment to indulge his fantasy life.

Suppose, as you're idling away at the bus stop, a car passes at speed, splashing you with water from a puddle, drenching your trousers. This time you might feel yourself deflating rather than puffing up. This is the emergence of self resulting from aversion. It can feel like the air going out of a balloon. The deflation may implode to form a tight constriction. Your face tenses angrily. You might feel constricted within your skin, facing a hostile world outside.

These are all examples of clinging or attaching—upadana in Pali. At this step we have the emergence of a sense of self. The mind does a bit more shuffling around in its enormous filing cabinet and decides to classify the incoming sense data as "me" or "mine."

When we get the compliment, instead of simply feeling happy and gratified that something has turned out well, we think it is *me* who is being complimented. This sense of "me" quickly projects itself into the future, and we start feeling powerful, thinking we will always be able to do so well. A very nice way to feel, if only it weren't based on delusion.

When we suppress neutral sensations in order to daydream, the pleasure of being idle is perceived as *me* who has the power to think and plan and daydream. When we cling to anger at the careless driver, we take their carelessness personally. So we don't just get wet—we get insulted.

In our gardening analogy, the weed has blossomed. It's fully developed and is ready to start sowing its seeds.

Our sense of self initiates the next link. *Bhava* in Pali is usually translated as "becoming." We experience this as willpower. The self puts its stamp on the world by an effort of will. Up till now, the sankhara is held as a potential within our body and mind. Now comes the moment for action.

We might shake our fists at the careless driver, hurl insults towards the back of their car. We might smile at the person who paid us the compliment and bring a more animated tone into the conversation. Even thoughts are willed. They don't emerge spontaneously from our mind, but from the intention to think. Willpower keeps us idling at the bus stop, imagining the rest of our day. Think of the effort of will it takes to stop this—to be mindful instead of being lost in thought.

This gives us some idea of the strength of will fuelling idle thoughts.

In our gardening analogy, the weed is now sowing its seeds. Each effort of will drops a new seed into the soil of ignorance. As we indulge hatred, we sow sankhara seeds of hatred. Similarly for greed and delusion. We shape our own character in the multitude of moments in which we exercise our will. A sobering thought. I'll say more about this tomorrow night.

Once we have exercised our will, something new starts to manifest in the world. This is the penultimate link, termed birth. Say the seed of greed was at the base of this particular turn of the wheel, and it found its outlet in reaction to the alluring smell of pizza. The self forms and wills us to get that pizza into our mouth. Thus the whole process of purchasing and eating a pizza is born. If instead the seed of ill will had found its outlet in the careless driver, an angry self forms, angry thoughts are willed into being, and a storm of rage initiates. Whenever the seed of delusion finds a mind willing to indulge it, we generate a stream of thoughts and images, and we start planning or daydreaming or worrying—whatever is our favourite pastime in idle moments.

The chain of events which we have just started gives our sankhara lots and lots of opportunities to sow more seeds. But every birth leads to death, the last link in the chain. Our idle plans and dreams fall apart when we get that splash from the passing car. Our pizza heaven disintegrates when all that's left on our plate is a few smears of tomato paste. Our bus stop rage could deflate into embarrassment if the car stops, the driver gets out to apologise, and we realise we're hurling insults at our neighbour.

With death comes all the dukkha of dying. The enticing pizza turns into a bloated tummy and worries about putting on weight. The plans for our day rarely work out quite so easily as we expect. The bout of rage ends up giving us a headache and raises our blood pressure.

We can sometimes identify these later links—from contact onwards to dukkha—while emotions fade away in mindful awareness. Say, for example, I've been clinging to rage over some troubling memory. A strong sense of self insists on my viewpoint in the affair. I feel self-righteous and indignant. I can't understand how the other person could have behaved so badly. Mindfulness shows me the effort and strain needed to maintain my self-righteous stance. I feel the tensions running through my body, the fear and confusion that are maintaining my sense of enmity. I am witnessing the stage of dukkha, the final link in the chain.

Sadly, I admit to myself that the effort is too much, that it's taking up all my energy and not getting me anywhere. I realise I will have to let go. Sometimes the emotion simply dissolves at that point. At other times, when the emotion has really run deep, letting go is a very gradual process. Although this prolongs the pain, it also helps me clarify the earlier stages in the wheel.

Once I decide to let go, there is a slight loosening of tension, and I now have the mental space to see more clearly. I feel the allure of self-righteousness, how wonderful it is to be morally superior. What I am now feeling is the dukkha associated with birth. I no longer want this particular birth into self-righteousness and rage, but I have no choice in the matter. Thoughts condemning the other person hammer through my mind. I feel the intense pressure pushing my face into a grimace, pushing my stomach into a knot, pushing the thoughts into my mind.

As I watch this mindfully, the emotion loses power and the thoughts dwindle down to an attempt to sustain them. I can sense willpower pushing the thoughts into being. Because of mindfulness, they now can't get much further than a sort of jabbering: *you, you, you*. What is clarifying for me here is the link of becoming—the way we push our emotions out into the world by an effort of will. I also feel the pain of each little jabber, each attempt to define myself as separate from the other person. So this is the dukkha associated with becoming.

In time, that effort of will too fades away, and I'm left in a perplexed state, trying to hold myself together. No thoughts form at this stage. It's as if I'm mesmerised. My mind has no flexibility to think. I'm usually holding my breath too. I feel totally stuck. What

I'm experiencing here is the dukkha associated with clinging. My system is stuck in body and in mind as desire fastens me to what it desires—in this case, to rewrite the past, to rid myself of the painful memory.

Eventually, the need to breathe overcomes the attachment. I feel my stuck state dissolve as I take those first tentative breaths.

The sense of self fades, and instead I feel a strong pushing sensation in my body that I recognize as aversion. I feel my attempts to push against the painful memory, to shut it out from consciousness. This is the link of desire, in this case in its negative form of aversion—the desire to get rid of the painful memory.

If I can hold attention steady on this pushing sensation, it eventually relaxes, and I sense the painful memory and the bare sensations involved in grief. But there is some flow now. The memory can flow through my mind and unpleasant sensations flow through the body. I might react occasionally and feel the dukkha of enmity. This is now so obviously futile and painful that I'm persuaded to relax again and open to the grief and the painful memory.

These are the stages of contact and feeling. I feel the sensations of grief. I am aware of the memory and also of the unpleasantness of the whole experience. But because I know the pain and futility of aversion, I do not react. Wisdom overcomes aversion.

If I can hold steady on that kernel of not wanting, it dissolves moment after moment as it contacts the painful memory and the sensations of grief. The seeds of ill-will are still sprouting in the seedbed of ignorance, hijacking consciousness for their favourite movie, finding their outlets in the emotion of grief and the pain of the memory. But the wheel stops at vedanā. Aversion is not being generated, and therefore the wheel cannot turn towards dukkha. The process is now sensed as a healing one, and compassion arises. Sooner or later, I start to see things from the other person's point of view.

As we watch the wheel turn and get to know the feel of its various links, we're also cleaning up the seedbed of ignorance, the first link in the chain. Our understanding of the Dhamma is increasing, and so ignorance is transforming to wisdom. Thus the wheel gets fewer chances to start turning.

What can we say about those moments when the wheel isn't actively turning? This brings us to the Third Noble Truth: that there is an end to suffering. Our task, according to the Buddha, is to realize this for ourselves.

So far, I've been talking about the experience of dukkha. To get to know the Third Noble Truth, we have to sensitize ourselves to the absence of dukkha. One danger that's easy to fall into is to over-dramatize this experience. The end of dukkha is the culmination of all our training, our years of practice. Surely it should come with loud applause, hoops of delight, balloons and fireworks. But in fact we sense the absence of dukkha in quiet moments that don't call for any special attention. Just to acknowledge the moment is enough. The penny drops. We realize Nibbāna is close at hand, there for the taking—our natural state.

Another way we screen out those quiet moments is to expect ourselves to be totally enlightened, or at least three-quarters of the way there, before we experience the end of dukkha. Of course there will for all of us be that wonderful moment when the teaching finally clicks into place and we know for certain that desire will never trouble us again. But even in our present unenlightened state we can experience fleeting moments when desire is stilled, when dukkha is not showing up.

There are various reflections that help develop our taste for quietness and the absence of drama. One is the translation of Nibbāna as cooling. The Buddha describes our unenlightened state as one of burning. All our senses are burning with desire. Unwittingly we keep loading on more fuel because of our attachments. But as we learn to let go, the fuel store is gradually burning out. We are cooling down. Nibbāna-ing, you could say.

As our passions cool off, what remains? Nibbāna is often described by absence—the absence of aging, death, pain, and any other form of suffering. Also the absence of what we would not normally think of as suffering. Here is an extract from one description the Buddha gave of Nibbāna:

There is, bhikkhus, that base where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air, neither this world nor another world nor both, neither sun nor moon. Here, bhikkhus, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.

This description is perplexing, bewildering even. Remember that the Buddha first thought that the enlightened state he had discovered was too subtle to be understood by others. Hearing this description of Nibbāna, who could blame him?

Although the description is perplexing, I also find it intriguing and inspiring. I'm drawn towards the mystery. But it can also stir grief and anger, because we think of absence in terms of loss. Could absence actually satisfy us? That would entail a huge shift in our normal way of seeing things.

But we can tiptoe towards this mystery by learning to appreciate absences. The Buddha specifically asks us to do this in terms of our mind states. For example, we are to notice the mind state of greed and the mind state of non-greed, the mind state of hatred and the mind state of non-hatred. We would rarely ask ourselves what is not in our minds at the moment, but it is part of the practice which sensitizes us to Nibbana.

So whenever you are feeling relaxed, see can you note that you don't feel greedy right now and that you don't feel angry right now. Thus we can deepen our appreciation of the state. We can also take note of the ending of any hindrance. If someone or something annoys us, we might be plagued by irritation for hours. Then it passes. We hardly notice the transition. But it's a very good time to be noting how pleasant it is not to feel irritated. The recent memory of how irritating it was to feel irritated helps us appreciate the absence.

I frequently get cramps in my feet. I used to dread these until I started using them as a Vipassana focus. It amazed me how quickly the pain diminished as I focused on it mindfully. It also intrigued me to find the moment when pain faded away. I noticed how my mind distanced itself as soon as pain started to fade, wanting to find something more interesting to latch on to. It became a good exercise for me to see could I keep track of those lingering sensations until they faded away.

We can practice this with any disturbance, mental or physical. That moment where desire fades away, for example. One moment we were disturbed by our longing for something, the next moment we weren't. It's so easy to miss these fleeting moments of peace as we hurl ourselves forward into the next challenge. But we need to pause for a moment to feel the momentary absence of trouble and learn to appreciate this.

Renunciation gives us an opportunity to practice with absences. This time we're being creative. We are creating an absence, a precious space which attunes us to Nibbana. If we decide not to watch TV for an hour some evening, a whole new space opens up in our lives. If we decide not to eat an extra biscuit, we're diminishing the power of greed as a disturbance in our psyche. Refraining from backbiting a person who annoyed us gives space for forgiveness to grow.

These sound easy but are quite challenging for most of us. It takes continual mindfulness to refrain from whatever is tempting us. Any little slip and we're turning on the TV, gobbling the biscuit, and passing a disparaging remark about the person who has annoyed us. The reward for renunciation is not immediately obvious, whereas the TV, the biscuit, and the catty remark all provide instant gratification. We need to fortify ourselves by considering the long-term benefits of a more peaceful mind.

Sometimes in meditation we feel the urge towards greed, hatred, or delusion but have the resources to resist these. For example, while we are watching the breath, we might feel the desire to stray into thoughts and fantasy. It can feel as though my chest, head, and neck are almost straining to lift off, tear away from the abdomen with its rhythmic, calming sensations. The energy accumulates in my head and I sense the urgent need to think. If I can catch all this, I can usually resist the temptation. The note, "not indulging, not indulging," can help. This gives me a more visceral feel for the benefits of renunciation. I sense the tranquility on offer from the sensations of breathing, counteracting the desire for heady excitement. It's so obvious looking at this that the rhythm of the breath is more deeply satisfying than indulging desire. Although this can bring up the grief of renunciation, it also helps me choose not to indulge desire. As well as strengthening willpower for renunciation, this nurtures the taste for absence.

It helps us question our preoccupation with clinging. Why does life need to be so full of pleasure? It takes so much energy to hold on to pleasure. Is there a possibility of letting it come and go without so much fuss?

We can cultivate a taste for absence at other levels in life. One teacher described how, having taken down an ugly shed in his back garden, he spent several days looking out the window and enjoying the absence of the shed. In my own case, now that I can no longer talk easily, I can sometimes enjoy the absence of talking. Before the operation, I would have enjoyed the buzz of conversation. While I still grieve the loss of this great joy in my life, I also appreciate the fact that there are now more moments of peace in the company of family and friends. I'm hoping others may also feel this benefit. For the first months, I couldn't use the electrolarynx and used to carry around a whiteboard and marker everywhere. A friend later remarked that when he saw me coming into a party with my whiteboard and marker, he felt relieved, looking forward to those relaxing moments of silence while people waited for me to write.

I am sure you all sense the benefit of not talking while you are here in retreat, and sense the benefit of this particular renunciation.

As we look around us, it's generally the objects we see, not the spaces between them. But what if there was no space? Imagine the clutter. We couldn't move. To find our way from one place to another, we seek out space. We actively search for absence, for the gaps between things. It's only these spaces that have the potential to receive our body as it moves, to let it go as it passes by.

Noticing and appreciating space, gaps, absence of difficulties, the ending of pain and emotional disturbance, the peace of not doing—all sensitize us to the third noble truth, the end of suffering. These unobtrusive, non-dramatic phenomena, so easy to ignore, have nonetheless the potential to alter the course of our lives, to reveal the quiet mystery at the heart of life and death, the stillness that penetrates all things.

Before finishing, I'd like to focus on that crucial mid-section of the wheel and show its potential to reveal the second and third noble truths as they show up in our experience.

Let's recap on the wheel using our gardening analogy. The soil of ignorance holds seeds of the unwholesome sankhāras. To get the wheel turning, one of these germinates in consciousness, implants itself in our body and mind to search through our senses for satisfaction. A seed of greed looks for pleasure, generates the desire for more, and a sense of self emerges to consume the pleasure. A seed of ill-will looks for displeasure, thriving in the battle to destroy and vanquish. It stimulates aversion and a sense of self emerges to fight its battles. A seed of delusion looks for neutral vedanā, thriving in the security of our imagination, where we are always the boss, protected from reality.

Once the sankhāra has blossomed into a self, it gets to work sowing new seeds. The willpower needed to drive each thought, word, and action drops another seed into the soil of ignorance. And as the thoughts, words, and actions manifest in the world, they initiate a chain of events. A seed of greed might get us gobbling some biscuits. A seed of hatred might get us into a tantrum. A seed of delusion lulls us into a spiral of thought and imagination. Dukkha emerges as the biscuits transform into indigestion, as the tantrum turns into spoiled friendships, as Walter Mitty falls back down to earth.

The remedy for this never-ending round of misery is, of course, mindfulness. Mindfulness of dukkha is one starting place, or, whenever possible, mindfulness of sense contact and vedanā—the point before the seeds have had a chance to blossom. If we can hold attention steady there, unwholesome sankhāras don't get a chance to spread their seeds.

At times we can grow quite peaceful, feeling the flow of sensations and feelings. Then a little prickle of desire emerges, prompting us to hold on to the peace. We sense the disturbance, the budding anxiety that edges desire. If we can note *desire, desire*, watching the disturbance as it manifests, it eventually fades away, leaving us in peace again.

Here we have the second and third noble truths manifesting in our experience. We sense for ourselves that desire causes suffering and that letting go of desire ends suffering. It's as simple as that. Simple but not easy.

I hope this reflection on the second and third truths helps us trust our underlying simplicity, our natural beauty, our birthright of ease.

May we and all beings be free from suffering.

CHAPTER 16

Fourth Noble Truth: The Path to the End of Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Noirin Sheahan offers a detailed exploration of the Fourth Noble Truth—the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of dukkha. Using the evocative image of cutting through a jungle, she explains how the path's three sections—wisdom (paññā), morality (sīla), and mental cultivation (samādhi)—work together as we form our way step by step. She reframes the traditional translation of 'right' as 'straightened out' or 'disentangled,' suggesting a gentler understanding of how we gradually free ourselves from the binds of suffering.*
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> *The talk gives particular attention to the relationship between sīla and the law of kamma, clarifying common misconceptions about how kamma operates alongside four other natural laws governing the physical world, heredity, mind, and dhamma itself. Sheahan emphasizes that it is our motivation—whether rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion or in generosity, goodwill, and wisdom—that determines karmic consequences, not merely our outward actions. She offers practical guidance on applying right speech, right action, and right livelihood to contemporary ethical challenges including consumption, climate change, and difficult livelihood questions.*
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> *The four brahmavihāras—mettā, compassion, muditā, and equanimity—receive careful treatment as practices that polish the 'heart side' of wisdom's sword, with detailed instruction on how each supports and balances the others. The talk concludes by examining how right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration work together in meditation, using the image of three children helping each other reach flowers on a tree. Throughout, Sheahan weaves together doctrinal precision with accessible metaphors, offering practitioners a map for the gradual journey from ignorance toward liberation.*

Tonight I want to talk about the fourth noble truth and how it relates to the law of karma.

The fourth truth states that there is a path leading to the end of suffering: the noble eightfold path. Our injunction is to follow that path.

There is a poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado that I find helpful in thinking about the eightfold path. Here is a very loose translation: "Wayfarer, there is no way. The way forms as you walk it."

So we can't look ahead and see where the eightfold path is taking us. We can't work out how long until we get to the end or the next milestone. We can only form the path step by step. We can think of the eight strands of the path as different parts to each step.

The path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality, and the cultivation of our mind and heart through meditation. Imagine trying to form a path through a thick jungle. The strands of wisdom cut through the thicket so we can see more clearly. We express our wisdom in the world by our speech, actions, and livelihood. This is our step into the clearing we have just hacked out. Rather than hacking away doggedly at the thicket in front of us, we rest to contemplate our new position, find the most promising route, the easiest branches to fell. This is the cultivation of heart and mind in meditation. These sharpen the sword of wisdom. And so we are ready to cut out the next step.

Each of the eight strands is described as "right." For example, the first section on wisdom has two subdivisions termed right understanding and right attitude. The word "right" can stir the judging mind, and I think the translations "straightened out" or "disentangled" give a better description of what happens as we follow the path. At first we get caught in tangles of thought when we try to work out how to live well. But the more we walk the path, the more we sense our thought processes straightening out, our emotional life disentangling. We become more straightforward in our dealings with others. In meditation, we can often feel ourselves getting into knots of tension as the hindrances show up, and then feel the relief as those knots loosen in the light of awareness.

Now, "straightened out" and "disentangled" are both a bit of a mouthful, so I'll follow the convention of calling each step "right this" or "right that." But bear in mind the gentler and more evocative sense that we disentangle ourselves from the binds of dukkha as we develop our path.

The first section of the path is right understanding. This is the polar opposite of avijjā, the ignorance that forms the basis for the wheel of conditions ending up in dukkha. While avijjā implies not understanding what causes suffering and what prevents it, this first step in the path leading out of suffering implies understanding those very processes. Hearing about and reflecting on the Dhamma cultivates right understanding.

But if understanding is confined only to the cognitive level, it can tighten into absolute judgments. Rules become commands, and to break them is treachery. When cognitive understanding filters into the domain of will and emotion, we take the Dhamma to heart. This is what we mean by right attitude, the second strand of the eightfold path.

Wisdom thus has two strands: right understanding, which is mainly cognitive, and right attitude, which means a wise heart. We often use the word "attitude" to describe negativity. We say he or she "has an attitude" to mean that they go their own way without much consideration for others. But in fact one can have a friendly attitude, and that is what is meant in the second strand of wisdom. While cognitive understanding tends to tighten the mind, friendliness tends to soften it. Together they make for a balance: enough honest discernment to be able to tell right from wrong, enough friendliness to forgive mistakes.

Right attitude emerges naturally as we practice mindfulness, but we can accelerate the process by also practicing the four Brahma Viharas. The term Brahma Vihara translates as "the abode of the gods."

Mettā, usually translated as goodwill or loving-kindness, is the first of these. We wish ourselves and others to be well and happy. This undermines the aversive habits that cloud our mind—ill will, anger, coldness, fear. It doesn't uproot the seed in the same way that mindfulness does, but it nulls the aversive effect. In our gardening analogy, you could say it covers over the weeds, preventing them from getting any sunlight, so they can't thrive and sow more seeds. The combination of mettā and mindfulness is very powerful. Mettā suppresses aversion to help us be more friendly and live in accord with the Dhamma, while mindfulness weeds away at the hindrances.

The second Brahma Vihara is compassion. As we undermine our habitual aversion to suffering, our hearts show their capacity for compassion, and our speech and activities become more caring. We practice this Brahma Vihara by bringing to mind someone who is having a hard time—it could be ourselves—and wishing them to be free from suffering.

The third Brahma Vihara is muditā, often translated as appreciative joy.

As we undermine fear, jealousy, and other aspects of ill will, our hearts are more easily gladdened by good news. We're not so ready to dismiss our own achievements with a self-deprecating remark like "that was nothing, really," but instead learn to congratulate ourselves for the effort we made. And when we hear of another's success, we feel happy for them.

We cultivate this Brahma Vihara by bringing to mind someone who has had good news—again, this can be ourselves—and saying, "May your happiness continue. May your happiness increase." Or if you prefer, "I am happy that you are happy." While compassion lets us bear the suffering in the world, mudita helps us acknowledge its joys. Metta forms the basis for both in its cultivation of friendliness.

All three of these Brahma Viharas need the support of the fourth: equanimity. Equanimity is one of the factors of enlightenment. Remember the bird with the wide wingspan, steadying the flock through the ups and downs of their journey.

Without equanimity, metta easily overshoots into attachment, and we become dependent on our friends for our sense of worth. With equanimity, we learn to accept that friends have separate lives, other responsibilities, other affections.

Without the balance of equanimity, compassion slides into pity. What's happening is that we're seeing ourselves as the stronger party caring for the weaker one. It can become an addiction—needing to be needed. Equanimity restores the balance, lets us see the strength at the core of the other's being, trust in their capacity to heal and recover. If the person is dying, equanimity helps us see this not as a tragedy but as part of the mystery of life, nothing to pity them for. After all, our own turn will come quickly enough.

Mudita escalates into excitement unless it is supported by equanimity. We latch on to the joy, identify with it, and believe life is going to be perfect from now on. When we inevitably fall from grace, we are shocked and confused, wondering what went wrong. Equanimity gives us the balance we need to recognise joy as a temporary gift, to enjoy it to the full and then let it go when the time is right.

What we let go into is equanimity—that peaceful balance of mind which knows better than to cling to the good stuff or struggle with the rotten stuff. The classic phrase used to cultivate equanimity is the reflection: "All beings are the owners of their kamma." This reminds us that we have no direct power over our own or others' happiness. It is designed as an antidote to the delusion of ourselves as a benign deity who can make people happy just by wishing this.

It sounds comical, but in fact it is a delusion easily stirred by practising with the Brahma Viharas. Even the term Brahma Vihara—abode of the gods—suggests this. It feels godlike to have our hearts filled with goodness, kindness, joy, friendliness, as if we are above and beyond the troubles of the world. In that sublime state, our thoughts of a person being well and happy are easily mistaken as the reality for that person.

The reflection "all beings are owners of their kamma" brings us down to earth. We realise our limitations. You may be able to find a phrase which carries the same meaning but resonates more easily in your heart. For example, I sometimes use the phrase "I trust you to find your own path to Nibbana." This helps me to see the other person more objectively and cultivates respect for their separate path in life.

Just as metta, compassion, and mudita need equanimity to balance them, equanimity needs the other Brahma Viharas for its own balance. Without them, equanimity easily slips into indifference. We let go of others to such an extent that we no longer feel anything for them. When this happens, it's time to start practising with whichever of the other three is most appropriate.

Right understanding polishes one side of the sword of wisdom. The Brahma Viharas polish the other side. With this double-edged sword we cut our way through the jungle of hindrances, clearing another step along our Eightfold Path.

This brings us to the next section of the path: sila in Pali, usually translated as morality or ethics. Sila is the expression of wisdom in daily life. I'm going to use the Pali word sila because we often associate morality with a strict, joyless approach to life. Family photos from Victorian times illustrate this. No one smiles. The children look miserable in their heavy, awkward suits. An austere father towers over them while his wife sits demurely at his side, laced and buttoned within an inch of her life. Desire finds no expression in this picture of morality.

But we need to remember that desire can also be wise. The desire to be happy is perhaps our most basic drive in life. It only gets us into trouble because we don't rightly understand what allows for happiness, what causes suffering. The Buddha promises us that if we follow this path we will be content and therefore happy. Morality in this light is seen as a step towards happiness.

I want to touch on the law of kamma here to clarify the link between morality and happiness. Kamma is the Buddha's teaching on causality. He discovered that happiness and unhappiness are governed by the laws of kamma. When we hear of someone's good fortune, we might say, "Ah, that's your good kamma showing up," and we might think along the same lines for misfortune. But this is a mistake. The Buddha said that kamma was one of five laws operating in the universe.

The first are the laws that govern the physical world. These, rather than kamma, could be at the basis for many common misfortunes—infections, car crashes—as well as major events like earthquakes, drought, and hurricanes. Physical conditions and the laws governing them can also bring good fortune: health, strength, a good harvest, or favorable weather.

The second set of laws are the biological laws of heredity. We may inherit a parent's musical ear or a family gene for heart disease.

The third are the laws that govern our mind. We might develop Alzheimer's and no longer be able to think clearly, or we may be born with a very high IQ or a talent for languages.

The fourth is the law of kamma.

Finally, there are the laws of Dhamma—that all phenomena are subject to change, aging, and death. No matter how impeccable our kamma, we will die.

Thus, kamma is only one of five sets of laws governing events in our life. We cannot ascribe someone's handicap or poverty to bad kamma. Neither can we ascribe their musical genius or longevity to good kamma. What we can ascribe to their previous kamma is a person's happiness or unhappiness. These, the Buddha discovered, operate under the law of kamma.

When we think, speak, or act motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion, we sow bad kamma which will eventually ripen to harm us and diminish our happiness. Similarly, thoughts of goodwill sow seeds of kamma that will ripen to benefit us and make us happier.

The harm we do ourselves from acting out of ill-will happens at the point of becoming, *bhava*, in the wheel of dependent origination that we spoke of last night. Remember the *sankhara* seeds, our habitual drives, that can germinate and then sprout through our senses to urge us to react to circumstances. At the point of *bhava*, our seed has blossomed into a sense of self who is now about to think, act, or speak under the influence of this habitual drive. At the moment the thought, deed, or act starts, a seed of that *sankhara* is sown, to sprout at some future time when the opportunity presents itself. For now, this *sankhara* has come out of potential into action, giving birth to a thought, an act, or an utterance that carries out its will.

How does this cause unhappiness? Say we were speaking out of ill-will. We say something nasty. We might feel powerful as a result, but since all things fall apart, sooner or later we feel vulnerable again. How do we get back to power? Find someone we can vent our anger on. So we get in the habit of nasty speech. Where does this lead us? We lose friends and gain enemies. Out of fear, some people might rally around us, but their suppressed feelings get in the way of real friendship, and most will be delighted to stab us in the back when they get the opportunity. A bully lives in a state of suppressed fear that his own deeds will be perpetrated on him.

Similarly for greed—the enjoyment is temporary while the stress of continually needing to consume is exhausting, and overconsumption itself can harm our bodies. Everything we consume has to be paid for, so we get stressed out with overwork. Satiating greed makes us feel needy rather than satisfied.

Delusion manifests in the myriad untested assumptions we make that let us ignore what doesn't serve our agenda. We might take our family and friends for granted, assume they will always be there for us. If one of them suddenly dies or emigrates, we might get quite a shock to find how much we needed them. We may have many regrets about how little we appreciated their company and support.

On the other hand, if we think, speak, or act out of generosity, goodwill, or wisdom, the law of kamma tells us that we will reap the benefits. There will be social benefits, as everyone prefers people who are generous rather than stingy, caring rather than unkind, wise rather than foolish. Also, the benefits go deep within us, as each kind word helps heal our own heart. Each act of generosity counters our sense of neediness. Each wise thought undermines our ignorance and delusion.

It is the motivation that matters for the law of kamma, not the act itself. If a doctor cares for his patients only because he gets well paid, he won't reap the benefits of kindness but will suffer the consequences of greed. Similarly, if our efforts to solve a conflict end up making it worse, we won't suffer any kammic harm, so long as our motivation was good.

Sila, the second stage of the Eightfold Path, is therefore not a simple matter of following rules for good behavior. We also need to examine our motivation. Often we are aware of mixed motives. We know we are angry, but we still feel it would be best to confront the person who angered us. Which seeds are we nourishing here—ill-will or wisdom? We can consciously make a suitable good wish, like "May this do more good than harm" or "May I learn from any mistakes I make," to help us move in the right direction.

The Buddha divides *sila* into three sections: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right speech has four aspects. It must be truthful, timely, and useful, as well as being said gently rather than harshly.

Truthfulness, in the long run, is easier on our psyche than lying. Probably the most usual way we lie is to exaggerate things for effect. If we lie or exaggerate, there's always a danger of being caught out, which leads to restlessness and worry. Apart from that, others come to distrust and disrespect us to some extent, which can limit their friendships.

Speech is useful from the point of view of Sila if it promotes happiness. Friendly greetings are useful, and small talk can also help us feel at ease. The main temptation towards unhelpful speech is gossiping. To gossip is to talk about the doings of third parties, often feeding on their misfortune. It can easily spread rumours and allow unchallenged backbiting.

I remember a neighbour telling me about a couple who had broken up. They had been building an extension to their house when the wife ran away with the builder. It might have been funny in a Hollywood movie, and the grin on her face told me she was seeing it in this light, not feeling for the family and the pain this would be causing.

Sometimes it can be difficult to draw the line between gossip, small talk, and the genuine need to discuss a third party's behaviour. During friendly chatter we often mention news of people we know in common. Ask yourself, how would I feel if this person was listening to our conversation? If you would feel any way embarrassed, it's likely that your talk has strayed into gossip.

On the other hand, if we've been hurt by someone, it often helps to discuss the matter with a third party. Keeping it all to ourselves for fear of generating the karma of wrong speech is not always the wisest course. We often need the help of a friend or counsellor to move towards forgiveness. The motivation here is not to gossip, but to clarify our thoughts and let our heart heal through sympathy. Basically we're asking our friend or therapist for help in bearing the difficulty.

We could see it as an extension of mindfulness practice. In mindfulness we let our angry thoughts crash through our psyche. He did this, she did that. I can't understand how they didn't notice. Eventually anger wears itself out. Letting these angry thoughts be heard by a friend or therapist brings the matter to a new level of consciousness. The shared awareness allows a bigger space for the anger to express itself and for the futility of anger to be acknowledged. Often the process can help turn our hearts towards understanding and forgiveness.

Timely speech is especially important when we have something difficult to say. Suppose we feel hurt by a friend's behaviour. If we see them despondent, harassed, or preoccupied by something else, best to hold back. It's so easy for negativity to spread like a virus. What was intended to restore friendship, despondency might translate into rejection, while harassment might be seen as yet another injustice. Best to ask them to meet to discuss something a bit sensitive, so that they will be more prepared for a genuine heart-to-heart conversation.

Harsh speech adds cutting words or a hurtful tone to whatever message we need to give. In the short term, this might make us feel more powerful, in control. But it often provokes the other into a riposte, and an argument can easily break out. Even if the other doesn't react but is crushed by our remark, we've lost some degree of their friendship. So in the long run, caring speech promotes our own happiness, while harsh speech leads us to the unhappiness and social isolation of the bully.

Right action has three components: to refrain from harming others, stealing their property, and misusing our sexuality. The greatest harm we can do to another is to take their life. The Buddha doesn't confine this precept to human life, and many Buddhists would be vegetarian for this reason. However, the Buddha didn't forbid his disciples to eat meat. This was probably pragmatic, for they had to survive on alms rounds and so had to accept whatever they were given.

While most of us would not want to kill or harm others, we can take this precept further by asking ourselves what we could do to promote others' welfare. Purchasing ethically produced goods would be one avenue; giving to charities which combat poverty would be another. We can also look after animal welfare as best we can, avoiding factory-farmed produce for example because of the horrendous suffering involved, or becoming vegetarians. Vegans take this a step further and avoid all animal products. This prevents much suffering—for example, the separation of calf from cow at the moment of birth, so that we can take the cow's milk for our dairy products.

Moving on to the second component of right action, not stealing. Few people who come on retreat would be involved in gross theft. But we can take this further to ask whether we are using more than our fair share of the earth's resources. Even governments now agree that human activities are adding to the problem of climate change. The effect is already being felt in many developing countries and threatens homes and livelihoods as well as food and water supplies.

Consumption of fossil fuel is a major component driving climate change. When we take a flight or drive rather than use public transport, we add to the problem. Every manufactured item we purchase adds to our carbon footprint. We need to regularly ask ourselves whether our energy consumption is justified, or whether we're frivolously frittering away the earth's resources and fuelling climate change.

The third component of right action is not to abuse our sexuality. Sexuality gives joy that can nourish and sustain a loving relationship. But if it is used frivolously or to gain power over another, it can lead to a great deal of suffering. Infidelity can cause enorm-

ous hurt and break up relationships. Abortion is surely suffering from the fetus's point of view, and very often from the mother's as well. And we have the horrors of childhood sexual abuse and vulnerable people being forced into prostitution.

While many of us will not have to face the suffering of abortion, sexual abuse, or forced prostitution, we do have to face many challenges in maintaining this precept within a society where sex outside of committed relationship is quite common. The main questions to keep in mind are: Could this lead to hurt or other harm for myself or others? Will it lead to happiness for myself or others?

The final strand of morality in the Eightfold Path is right livelihood. We need to be sure our livelihood is not harming others. The livelihoods the Buddha listed as wrong were those dealing with weapons, poisons, slavery—including buying and selling children and prostitution—intoxicants, and meat. Weapons, poison, slavery, and butchery can obviously kill and harm, while intoxicants promote delusion.

Few people would argue with the advice not to have anything to do with slavery or forced prostitution. The harm these do is beyond question. But the other areas mentioned here are tolerated in our society, making this a very challenging aspect of the Eightfold Path for those already employed in one of these fields.

Although few poisons are sold legally nowadays, there is the tricky area of pest control. If your work involves dealing with these, see whether you could stock a compassionate alternative. For example, there are rat and mouse traps that do not kill the animal, and also alternatives for dealing with slugs.

Butchery obviously involves great suffering for animals, and very often there are long, frightening journeys involved before slaughter. To be directly involved in this must be an incredible challenge to a sensitive heart and can only foster cruelty and indifference. Rearing animals for slaughter is part of this same business. The Buddha's unequivocal advice is to get out of this aspect of farming, and anything else to do with the meat trade, for your own spiritual welfare as well as the welfare of animals.

Many people are employed in the weapons industry, from soldiers on the ground to scientists in the laboratory. So much war seems pointless and horrific when seen from a distance or with hindsight. Who, in hindsight, could justify the atrocities of the First World War or the Vietnamese War? But many would argue that it was justified in the Second World War in order to prevent the rise of Hitler. In 1995, over eight thousand people were massacred in Srebrenica as the UN stood by. Was the UN right not to attack the invading Serbs in order to defend these civilians?

These are hard questions. In war, each side justifies their action, seeing the enemy as the greater threat to humanity. But can you stand by as atrocities are committed? Would it be justified to kill the guards of a concentration camp in order to liberate those within? There are no easy answers here. It is a question of choosing the lesser of evils. Certainly a soldier's life is not to be envied from the point of view of karma. It would need the wisdom of a Buddha to choose the most compassionate response in such a situation.

Bhante has an essay, "Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?", on the Satipanya website, which explores this in more depth. He distinguishes between force and violence, which helps us clarify sīla in our response to the question of war. His essay also cites wonderful exemplars of the non-violent approach to conflict management. Great leaders like Nelson Mandela and Gandhi brokered peace for warlike situations. And figures like Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama inspire us to look only for a peaceful solution.

The injunction not to deal with intoxicants poses hard questions for many people, as almost every shop, restaurant, and hotel is expected to supply alcohol. If we can change job, then it is best to do this, but if not, do we make ourselves redundant to avoid this problem? What about the consequences for our family? Would the harm to them be justified? Our culture makes it easy for us to justify alcohol, and most of us know people who live good lives while drinking moderately. On the other hand, many road accidents are alcohol-related, as well as domestic and street violence and sexual abuse. Our cultural ease with alcohol also facilitates alcoholism with all its problems. And if we are interested in liberation, can it ever help to cloud our mind with alcohol?

As I think you will agree, sīla is not an easy matter. For each of us there will be difficult ethical questions to face at some stage in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response in complex situations and a stout heart to meet the challenge.

The last section of the Eightfold Path concerns the cultivation of mind and heart in meditation practice. Let us first pause to review our progress. We hacked out a clearing using the sword of wisdom with its double blade—right understanding and right attitude. We stepped into the clearing as we brought wisdom into our speech, action, and livelihood. Now we need to rest a while, assess our new surroundings, and polish our sword of wisdom before we tackle the thicket again.

This section of the path also has three strands: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Right effort involves the factor of energy that we met among the factors of enlightenment. So here we have again the leading trio in our wild geese. To see their interrelation, we have the analogy of three children wanting to pick some flowers from a tree. None of them is tall enough to reach the flowers, so the strongest one, right effort, bends over to let the tallest one, right concentration, stand on his back, while the steadiest of the three, right mindfulness, provides a shoulder for him to lean on. Supported by right effort, balanced by mindfulness, concentration can then pluck the flowers.

Now this image isn't quite in accord with our image of the wild geese, which had mindfulness in the lead. But they can come together if we still see mindfulness as the leader, just not the tallest. Mindfulness tells concentration to draw back if he is overreaching, unbalancing the trio. When mindfulness is happy that the trio are well balanced, it is the ability of our minds to focus on whatever is taking our attention that lets the Dhamma clarify for us.

Right effort involves all the energy and resolution we bring to our meditation practice. The Buddha delineates right effort into four components: to prevent unwholesome states from arising, to let go of those that have already arisen, to encourage new wholesome states, and to perfect those that have already arisen.

The effort we make to maintain moment-to-moment awareness prevents unwholesome states from arising. If we can maintain awareness at the level of sense contact and feeling, the hindrances don't get a chance to blossom and spread their seeds. This carries out the first component of right effort.

The second component involves the effort we make to hold attention steady on dukkha. This allows us to let go of hindrances that already cloud our consciousness. As we notice the transitory, uncontrollable nature of pleasure and pain, we undermine desire. Working with aversion brings us to the edge of our comfort zone. Right effort allows us to hold attention there until the boundary starts to dissolve, and we realize it was all illusion. Really, there was nothing to fear or hate. Our efforts to stir energy through physical exercise and mental resolution undermine dullness and lethargy, while the effort to center attention on some calming focus undermines restlessness. As we stir the factor of investigation, we clarify the Dhamma for ourselves, undermining doubt.

The third component of right effort involves encouraging wholesome states to manifest. This also results from the effort we make to maintain mindfulness in meditation. All seven of the factors of enlightenment are being developed and perfected, and these transmute into the five spiritual faculties to help us through daily life.

The final component involves the effort we make in practicing mettā and the other Brahma-vihāras. These bring our wholesome states to perfection.

We bring bare attention to our sensory experience, including the sixth sense of our mind with its feelings, emotions, and thoughts. We sense any reactions to these: desire trying to wrap us around pleasant feelings, aversion trying to push away unpleasant feelings, delusion trying to shut out physical sensations for the sake of a mental pleasure world. Sensing the pain of reactivity, wisdom persuades us to relax again, to let pleasant and unpleasant sensations be just as they are.

Concentration, the final strand of the Eightfold Path, describes the mind's ability to focus, like looking through a telescope. It brings stillness to the mind by unifying it with undistracted focus on whatever calls attention. Increasingly, what calls attention is dukkha and what causes it, as well as the opposite side of the coin—the absence of dukkha and the conditions that foster this. In other words, it is the Four Noble Truths that interest us, and their manifestation in our experience is what calls attention.

At times the hindrances are kept in check by the factors of enlightenment, and we sense a current of ease running underneath our usual sense of experience. Our being tiptoes towards the mystery. What is the experience of ease? What would be left of us if there was no urge driving us into action? We become more familiar with the seeming absence of our usual self, with the fluid, changing, unsatisfying nature of the reality we inhabit, and the quiet mystery that runs beneath.

This focus is only possible on the back of right effort—our efforts not to grasp at the temporary pleasures of the world and to cultivate instead the qualities that sustain our meditation. And it needs the leadership of mindfulness, the reminder to relax our focus whenever mindfulness senses that new seeds of grasping or aversion are sprouting up. It's easy for these to sprout as we gaze beyond our usual boundaries. We get confused or frightened, restless or dull, or so deeply desiring the end of suffering that we cloud our minds with attachment to progress and aversion to whatever seems to be getting in our way.

The Buddha's promise is that one day the turmoil will end. We will satisfy our desire for the end of suffering. With that, we will know for ourselves what remains when all desire fades away.

A quick recap before finishing. The path starts with wisdom. Lost in the jungle of ignorance, we ponder the Buddha's teaching to get an inkling of what causes suffering and what relieves it. As the truth sinks into our heart, our attitude to the world grows friendlier. The jungle doesn't seem quite so impenetrable, and the sword of wisdom cuts

through delusion to form a clearing. Here, sīla blossoms in the form of right speech, action, and livelihood, to be rewarded by the law of kamma, opening our hearts to happiness. We rest a while in the clearing to cultivate our heart and mind in meditation. We make the effort needed to maintain mindfulness. Supported by effort, led and balanced by mindfulness, our mind focuses on the Dhamma, and we learn the Four Noble Truths for ourselves. This sharpens the sword of wisdom, the first strands of the Eightfold Path. Step by step, the Eightfold Path leads us from the jungle of ignorance to the freedom of enlightenment.

I hope this reflection on the Fourth Noble Truth has been helpful.

May we and all beings follow the Eightfold Path to the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 17

Foundations for Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta) - Read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · 50 min

> *This talk offers a thorough and accessible guide to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), which Noirin Sheahan describes as "the jewel of all the Buddha's teachings." She presents the four foundations of mindfulness—body, feeling, mind, and dhammas—using the evocative image of pastures where the mind grazes and finds nourishment for awakening. The teaching distinguishes between the direct approach of vipassanā meditation and the indirect approach of samatha jhāna, offering encouragement that liberation is accessible even to lay practitioners living busy lives.*
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> *The talk carefully unpacks the attitude required for vipassanā practice: being ardent, mindful with clear comprehension, and setting aside worldly cares. Sheahan integrates this teaching with the seven factors of enlightenment (using her memorable image of wild geese in formation) and the wheel of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), showing how mindfulness at the point of sense contact prevents the arising of dukkha. She explains the three ways of attending described in the sutta's refrain: calming and focusing attention, exploring the transient nature of experience, and resting in bare knowledge.*
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> *Practical exercises are offered throughout, including contemplation of the breath, bodily postures, the four elements (earth, water, air, fire), and the various mind states. The distinction between worldly and unworldly feelings provides insight into how even spiritual experiences can become objects of clinging. The talk concludes with the Buddha's assurance that seven days of diligent practice according to this sutta can lead to deep insight or even full liberation.*

Tonight I want to talk about the four foundations for mindfulness. In Pali this is the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Sutta means a teaching or a discourse, and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is considered the jewel of all the Buddha's teachings.

For the past few days we've been focusing on the Four Noble Truths. These describe the insights the Buddha discovered on his way to enlightenment. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta tells us how to observe our experience in order to come to these very insights. It's the how-to of the Dhamma.

It's often called the direct approach, by comparison to the indirect approach of samatha meditation, which includes an extra step: generating a deep state of concentration and peacefulness. The meditation described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is termed vipassanā, while the deeply peaceful states are termed samatha jhāna. In this teaching, the Buddha clarifies that we do not need to attain the samatha jhāna in order to have the insights necessary for liberation.

This is really good news for lay people because the samatha jhāna are best supported in secluded monastic conditions. By comparison, vipassanā is possible even when we are living a busy life. Perhaps to emphasize this, the Buddha addressed the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the jewel of his teachings, to lay people. It was given when he visited the town of Kammāsadamma and was impressed by how diligently the native Kuru people were practicing mindfulness in their ordinary daily lives. Although the Buddha refers to the meditator as a bhikkhu, which nowadays only refers to an ordained monk, it originally referred to anyone who practiced the Dhamma.

Let's look for a moment at the word satipaṭṭhāna. The Pali word sati means mindfulness. The word paṭṭhāna is usually translated as foundation, but I like an alternative that Joseph Goldstein suggests: pasture. It evokes a pleasant image of the mind grazing in various pastures. This suggests restfulness, but also engagement. The mind isn't idly sunbathing in the pastures—it is finding and taking nourishment in each. Our journey to enlightenment involves nibbling and digesting the insights on offer when attention dwells in these pastures.

Think of a rural landscape with gently undulating ground. Our mind can rove around here and there, exploring all its little nooks and crannies, its bright patches and its shady copses. There are mucky patches too, and marshes and rocky cliffs and perhaps thickets of briars. Our job is to get to know them all.

Here and there in tonight's talk, I'm going to dovetail this teaching with that on the seven factors of enlightenment and with the wheel of dependent origination. So just a quick recap. The wheel describes the twelve-step process leading from ignorance to dukkha. The gardening image is a helpful way to remember the wheel: all the problems starting with the whirlwind of ignorance, carrying in seeds of saṅkhāra, which can then implant themselves and grow up to become a bed of weeds, which are themselves decaying and dying when we come to our final step of dukkha.

The seven factors are the beautiful qualities we develop in meditation. Remember our wild geese? These give an image for the seven factors. Mindfulness is in the lead, supported by two flanks. There is a wide flank eager to push ahead and a slipstream

flank calming everything down. If you want to put all three images together, think of our job in meditation being to get those wild geese into our pastures to nibble away at the seedlings before they grow into a thicket of briars and thistles.

Before describing each of the pastures, the Buddha describes the attitude needed for vipassanā. First, we need to be ardent. This indicates a degree of fervour. We speak of an ardent lover. We won't gain insight if we are cynical or offhand in our approach. We need to put our hearts into the practice.

The next phrase can be translated as "mindful with clear comprehension." This corresponds with the factor of investigation in our seven factors. The phrase "ardent, mindful with clear comprehension" signifies mindfulness supported by the wide energetic flank of our wild geese.

The final phrase is "having put aside covetousness and grief with regard to the world." Thus we need to let our worldly cares take a back seat for the purpose of practicing vipassanā. This doesn't mean we suppress our cares. It means we let them become our focus for meditation whenever they show up. When grief shows up, we know we are grieving. Letting our worldly cares be examined like this helps focus the mind and cultivates calm and equanimity. So here we have the other flank of our wild geese, the slipstream.

The four pastures are body, feeling, mind, and dhamma. It's interesting that the Buddha doesn't list these as four nouns as I've just done. Lists of nouns tend to objectify and simplify the world. The way the Buddha puts it tends to draw the world into our inner experience. He describes them within the meditation practice itself: "A bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put aside covetousness and grief with regard to the world. He abides contemplating feelings as feelings." And so on for all four.

Burying the noun within his description of the attitude needed for vipassanā suggests that the type of attention we bring into the pasture matters as much, if not more, than the pasture itself.

The phrases "contemplating the body as a body," "feelings as feelings," and so on are also striking. This indicates that our attention needs to sink into these four areas to glean the wisdom offered by their contemplation. It is only by experiencing them mindfully, with clear comprehension, that they can deliver us from suffering.

The Sutta then goes on to describe how to practice within each of the pastures. The section on body contemplation starts with the breath—knowing when we are breathing in and when we are breathing out, knowing when our breath is shallow and when it is

deep. The next steps describe calming ourselves using the breath by bringing the thought of tranquility to mind as we feel the breath rise and fall. Remember, we talked of the need to calm ourselves whenever the wide flank of our wild geese are rushing ahead and tending to scatter the flock. So here is the Buddha's suggestion for doing just that: noting "calming, calming" with each breath.

The next section is described as a refrain because it is repeated again and again throughout the Sutta. It describes the various ways insight can arise. By insight, we mean a glimpse of some aspect of the Buddha's teaching—for example, the Four Noble Truths.

It may be an insight into the first truth, dukkha. We may really feel the changing nature of experience, that all experience is passing away like grains of sand slipping through our fingers, and sense that nothing lasts long enough to satisfy our deep needs for security.

Or we may get a glimpse of the second truth—that desire is the cause of dukkha. Suppose a memory of some argument has come up and we are embroiled in indignation and anger, insisting over and over again that we were right and the others were wrong. Every few moments we wake up to what is happening and feel the pain of this experience. Eventually, worn out and in despair, we give up the battle. Lo and behold, the pain disappears. We realize that clinging to the notion "I was right" was what was causing us to suffer. It was not the memory; it was our reaction to it. That is a direct experience of the second noble truth. A revolutionary thought surfaces: maybe it does not matter much which of us was right or wrong.

That moment when the pain disappeared was also an insight into the third noble truth—the fact that dukkha stops. We need to sensitize ourselves to those lulls in our emotional storms, to start taking them seriously. Until we are fully enlightened, dukkha will eventually start up again, perhaps as we start craving that this moment of peacefulness will go on forever. Sad, is it not? We have to let peacefulness come and go, just as it will. Paradoxically, when we can surrender to that sad fact, we experience deeper peace.

At another time, we may get a glimpse of some aspect of the fourth noble truth. For example, we may be worrying that we are not meditating correctly, feeling nervous and constricted, as if we are going to be thrown out of the dhamma hall any moment. Then, miraculously it might seem, something changes and we decide, "I'm doing okay. This is good enough." Our hearts lighten. We stop worrying. Our attention sinks more easily into our breath and we sense the joy of simply being present, breathing.

In that moment we gain confidence that meditation could show us a way towards the end of suffering, and we can see the importance of right attitude. When we were worrying and condemning ourselves, we were caught up in the hindrance of aversion. When we said, "This will do," we were accepting our experience. That is the only thing that changed. This gives us a direct insight into the fact that an accepting attitude is integral to the path.

These are some examples of insights that can happen as we meditate, and they can occur while we are following any of the exercises described in the Sutta. The refrain tells us what to do in order to deepen our insight. There are three subdivisions to the refrain.

Firstly, the Buddha says, "In this way he abides, contemplating the body as a body internally." Contemplation requires full awareness and understanding. We are not just vaguely aware of breathing. The Mahasi noting of the in-breath and out-breath gathers our mind in this way, calming us down and focusing our attention on the experience of breathing. This first section of the refrain reassures us that gathering the mind and calming ourselves is an integral part of gaining insight. We do not have to be calm and focused for insight; insights can be sinking in as we are using the breath to encourage ourselves to calm down.

He then says we can practice in this same way, but externally. The most common interpretation for this is that we contemplate the breathing of another person. It would take very deep concentration to be able to discern when another person is breathing in or out—a much more challenging practice, which may be why it is so rarely taught. The next suggestion is even more challenging: to contemplate the body both internally and externally, following our own breath and that of another simultaneously. Maybe in our next lifetimes.

And although I will not labor the point, it is worth knowing that he repeats this suggestion for all other exercises in the Sutta, so we can gain insight by bringing awareness to the feelings of others, as well as to their mind states. Although it would take supernormal powers to be able to directly intuit the feelings and minds of another person, it fosters metta to make any attempt in that direction.

For the purposes of this retreat, we will confine ourselves to our internal pastures. But outside of retreat, we can practice becoming more aware of others in this moment-to-moment fashion.

Following their breathing, if we can detect it, their walking, their postures, daily activities, and all the other exercises in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta that we'll go through now. This is a deep form of mettā practice. We have the Buddha's assurance that this is also a perfectly valid form of insight meditation.

So that's the first of the three suggestions in the refrain: to bring our full awareness and understanding to the breathing process.

The second suggestion directs our attention to the transitory nature of bodily experience. Each breath arises and passes away, and within that, each sensation of breathing arises and passes away. The Buddha describes this as the arising and vanishing nature of the body.

He first directs our attention to its arising nature. Can you sense the breath coming into being each moment? The in-breath is particularly useful here. See if you can feel its first manifestation and how it then continues to swell the body.

Next, he directs attention to what he terms the body in its nature of vanishing. One breath vanishes before the next one can appear. The out-breath is most helpful here, following its movement moment after moment until it stops.

His next suggestion is to be aware of both the arising and passing nature of the body. Here we sense the full breath, in and out, as a flow of discrete sensations. As one vanishes, the next arises.

These three exercises help us to see the truth of anicca, transience. Although our minds project continuity and permanence into the world, the experiential truth is that things are constantly changing. They arise and a moment later they vanish. We can nudge our minds towards this truth by experiencing the breath arising and passing, as the Buddha suggests in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

His final suggestion for insight is simply to be aware of our bodies. In the Buddha's words: "Mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness." This suggests a very light touch—bare knowledge. It's quite a contrast to the first suggestion, to abide contemplating the body as a body, which suggests more energetic gathering of our powers of attention and understanding.

So we have the three suggestions for gaining insight. The first involves calming and focusing the mind on the body. The second explores its transitory nature. The third simply requires bare knowledge of the body.

The first describes the active effort we need to make to calm ourselves and steady attention within the felt sense of breathing. Here we're working on the slipstream flank of our wild geese. Once we're settled, we can afford to open our minds to be more exploratory. This is where his second suggestion comes in: we explore the transitory nature of experience. This is the particular expertise of our wide flank, the ones that push us ahead.

At times our minds come to a point of delicate balance and we sense mindful investigation carrying on of its own accord. We sense any attempt we make to either calm or probe more deeply as slightly disturbing, so we can refrain from any effort. At this stage, the third suggestion—bare attention—comes into play.

At times this kind of exploration pulls us towards a deep state of peace. Sometimes it's the opposite: we get fearful and all kinds of underlying emotions come to the surface. In both cases, the third suggestion of bare knowledge can be applied.

Take the emotional storm. This can batter us with wild thoughts and painful feelings. But so long as we're aware of a body that exists in the midst of it all, we're still on the direct path to enlightenment. We're in the pasture and our intelligence is open to insight, even in the midst of a hurricane of anger or lust. We're not doing any deep investigation. It's just the lightest touch of body awareness. The geese are flapping around at a great rate, devouring the weeds.

Bare knowledge of the body also grounds us when the mind is being drawn towards the calm of a jhāna. In these states, we can lose touch altogether with our bodily sensations. The danger is that we also lose any degree of intelligence. If we have to keep remembering our physical nature, we would be bringing wisdom into the realm of jhāna. Our slipstream geese are lulling us to sleep, but the wide flank have just enough energy to keep prodding us awake.

So no matter what aspect of the four pastures you are examining, you always have three choices for how to attend. You can calm and gather your attention by focusing on any of the exercises suggested in the Sutta. When your attention is steady, you can examine the transitory nature of your experience. The final option, bare attention, applies when there is that knife-edge of balance between calm and curiosity. It grounds you through temptations to drift into an emotion or jhāna state.

The Buddha's final comment in the refrain is that he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This serves as a reminder not to identify with whatever we are experiencing. Remember, it's all going to change. If we cling to joy, calm, or clarity, we will later be screaming with frustration when these are so unfairly taken from

us. If we resist states like confusion and agitation, we unwittingly prolong them. In contrast, relaxing into them shows us that they too are composed of sensations and feelings which simply arise and pass away—nothing to be worried about, just another hillock in our pasture. All states can deliver the insight we need for liberation.

So that's the refrain: the various suggestions for how we look at our experience. The Sutta then goes back to describing what it is we look at.

First, we had the breath. The Buddha next goes on to describe four bodily postures as foundations for mindfulness: standing, sitting, walking, or lying down. The following section describes more broad-based mindfulness—being fully aware when we are looking about, moving around, eating, drinking, talking, keeping silent. Even defecating and urinating are included. This covers all of our daily life. After both sections, the refrain is repeated in full. We might have a jhānic insight as we're sitting on the loo.

The next section involves the use of thought or mental images. We bring to mind the various parts of the body: hair on the head, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, and all the way through the major organs, down to spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine. We don't often dwell on the separate parts of the body. The exercise can stir disgust or fear. But of course, these reactions can be experienced mindfully as a means of purifying our relationship with our bodies. We lose some level of deluded identification with our physical form as we go through this contemplation. Disgust changes to humble appreciation as we realise that our path to liberation depends on entities like snot, spittle, oil of the joints, and urine as they do their quiet work to keep us alive.

The next section is more appealing: contemplating the body in terms of the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire. While the previous exercise involves the faculty of thought and imagination, this exercise involves physical experience.

The earth element describes the experiences of hardness, softness, weight, and pressure. For example, try this exercise just now. Gently squeeze one hand within the other. Can you feel areas of bony hardness and fleshy softness? Squeeze more tightly. Can you feel the pressure? Try lifting one hand in the other. Can you feel its weight? All these are explorations of the earth element in your body.

The water element is easier to experience externally—as you're washing the dishes, for example, or taking a shower. Feel the way it flows around you, always changing its course to suit your shape. It can also be sensed as the fluidity in the movement of joints. Try rotating your wrist. Can you sense the fluidity required for this? Rotate your shoulders. It couldn't happen if the bones weren't separated by a layer of fluid.

The air element is sensed in movement. Gently move your hands or arms now. How do you sense movement? Isn't it very subtle, as light as air? You can explore this during walking meditation, especially when the foot is moving forward.

The last of the elements is fire, which describes our sense of temperature. This includes both heat and coolness. Scan your body now to see if any areas feel warm. Try putting your hands on your face. Often there's a difference in temperature, and so we feel both warmth and coolness. It can be hard to work out which part is cool and which is warm. Whenever you go outdoors, see can you sense any change in temperature.

I find the exercise on the elements helps my attention to dwell on the body for longer periods. By contrast, the next exercise is more likely to shoot my attention outwards into clouds of thought. This is the contemplation on death.

In the Buddha's time, human bodies were left to decay in open areas called charnel grounds. He asked his followers to go there and watch the process of decay. Although this sounds horrific, the purpose is to meet our fear of death and come to terms with our mortality. We can practice this contemplation on death by reminding ourselves that our bodies too will fall ill, grow old, and eventually die. If we can bear mindfully with any emotional responses, we may eventually come round to a deeper appreciation for the body in its present live and functional state, and a determination to make the best of this short stay on earth that we have been offered.

After each of these exercises, the Buddha repeats the refrain, emphasizing that insight can be gained as we do any of them. This brings to an end the section on the body. All of these exercises in this first foundation require that attention rest at the point of sense contact in the wheel of dependent origination—in this case involving sense contact from seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. Sense contact, the midpoint of the wheel, is where our inner world, our potential, finds an outlet to explore and perhaps express itself in the outer world. If we can ground ourselves at sense contact, the wheel can't turn all the way to dukkha. Our wild geese are pecking at the weeds the moment they show their heads above ground.

The Buddha then goes on to describe the next foundation for mindfulness: feeling. As you may remember, this is the next link in the wheel of dependent origination. Once our senses have made contact, we then categorize the sensation as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. In Buddhism, that basic categorization is what we mean by feeling.

When the mind is tending to wander easily, it is often helpful to ask: what feeling is fueling these thoughts? This can draw us towards the root of the problem, as it is our reaction to feeling that drives the wheel to the wandering mind and thereby to dukkha.

Often there will be a zone of tension in the body corresponding to the attempt to cling to pleasure or get rid of unpleasant feelings. The emotion underlying the thoughts has its root here. If we can bring attention to that area of the body, we get a sense of ourselves clinging to some feeling at the center of the knot. At that stage, our thoughts often quieten down.

However, this is not an easy process. Feeling is a more subtle level of experience than sense contact. We need a degree of calm and equanimity to be able to steady the mind on feelings, so have patience with this foundation.

Coming back to our wild geese: when emotions run deep, the wide flank tends to go a bit wild when I turn attention on feelings, so it needs constant rebalancing. The body is a great help here. Coming back again and again to the sensations of breath or of posture takes the heat out of the situation. Slowly, slowly, catchy monkey.

After some perseverance, attention may be able to rest in or near the physical sensations associated with the emotion and detect their pleasantness and the tendency to grasp onto this, or their unpleasantness and the tendency to push these away. The third category of feeling, neutral feeling, won't be at the core of emotional tension. We don't try to grasp or push away neutral feeling; the habitual reaction is to ignore it. We're working with neutral feelings when we're persuading our attention to rest on the breath and the footsteps. Our difficulty in holding attention steady is not that we dislike or are enthralled by the physical sensations, but that we want a more exciting focus.

Although it can be quite a challenge to get our attention to rest calmly in this foundation, the pickings are very rich. We're learning not to identify with our feelings, letting go of the habitual reactions of desire, aversion, and ignoring.

I'll say more about feelings tomorrow night, but for the moment I just want to mention that in this sutta the Buddha also points out another distinction: between worldly and unworldly feelings. Worldly feelings are based on sense contact. Unworldly feelings are associated with spiritual endeavor—generosity, mettā, compassion, meditative joy are all unworldly feelings.

They also happen to be pleasant feelings, and of course there's a danger that we cling to them unwittingly, thinking, "I am generous, I am filled with loving-kindness." This feels fine until something bursts that bubble. The fall to earth can be very sore and bring out the worst in us. Suddenly we hate everyone. But if we can be mindful of the pleasant feeling, we can appreciate it and use it to fuel our generosity and mettā and all other beautiful states.

There can also be unpleasant feelings that come from spiritual endeavor. We may feel ashamed or depressed because our minds keep wandering or because we can't understand the Dhamma. The big danger, of course, is to identify with these feelings and let ourselves become discouraged. But if we can open to the feelings, they can bring up a tender compassion for our unenlightened state. This is quite a deep degree of self-acknowledgment and self-care—very healing. Once we sense this, the very unpleasantness locks us into the compassionate response and thereby propels us along the path.

Neutral unworldly feelings are associated with equanimity. If we don't notice these, we can set up a subtle level of clinging, thinking, "I am equanimous." But of course, this bubble also bursts in time. If we acknowledge the neutral feelings, these can release us into a wise appreciation of equanimity.

The Buddha again repeats the refrain after describing this second foundation. Here he is clarifying that we can gain the insight needed for liberation by knowing whether we are feeling a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling, and knowing whether it comes from sense contact or spiritual endeavor.

Similarly, we can study transience in our feelings, noticing how these arise and pass away. As with the body, the third possibility is to simply note "there are feelings," without any attempt to categorise or detect their transient nature.

The next section of the sutta involves contemplating our mind. This involves, for example, knowing when we're angry or greedy, and all the variations on these. Anger may take on hues of irritation, fear, frustration, jealousy, or cruelty. Greed can take the form of excitement, romance, lust, euphoria, or passionate attachment.

To correlate this with the wheel of dependent origination, we're now focusing on the early stages of the wheel, the stages prior to sense contact. These make up the attitude we bring into being at the point of contact. We think we see and hear things objectively, but in fact our perception is coloured by whatever mind state is driving us to sense contact.

I had a good illustration of this one time when doing walking meditation. It was a big, airy room and I had been alone until someone came in and started walking quite close nearby. I felt myself contract in aversion. At the same time, I could have sworn the room went dark. I had experienced the darkening of the room and the darkening of my mind simultaneously, and could intuitively sense their connection. Nevertheless, I couldn't quite believe that my perceptions could be so easily modified. I looked out the window to check whether a big rain cloud had appeared, but it hadn't. The sky was still

blue. Reluctantly, I accepted that even my perception of light could be influenced by my mood. I was quite dismayed. The outside world wasn't quite so stable and objectively real as I had believed.

When we dwell mindfully in this pasture, we are noting what moods or mind states we're bringing to being at every point of sense contact. Otherwise, we're being controlled by the mind state. It is driving us into thought and action, but we're not conscious of this. We believe the thoughts. For example, something irritates us and we grow tense in indignation, generating thoughts like, "It's not fair." The resulting unpleasant feelings of tension prompt us to think yet again that it's not fair. So we think the thoughts again and again, convincing ourselves of their truth. The thoughts fuel the underlying emotion, and so we get more deeply caught in the negative spiral.

The first step is to replace the thought stream with the noting word "thinking, thinking." This takes one level of feedback out of the loop. The body is our great ally in coming close to the root of the problem. We might need to calm for a while, using the breath, for example. Then, if we can feel where the body is tensing, this draws our attention towards the underlying emotion. We can simply note "feeling, feeling" here. But sometimes getting the right noting word is like hitting the nail on the head. All the mind state really wants is recognition.

The more often we bring attention into this posture, the better we get at discerning our moods and emotions. In this case, for example, noting "indignation" might bring a palpable release of that pent-up energy. However, if the emotion runs deep, we must be patient and keep on noting while it eventually burns itself out. If we lapse in mindfulness, we will be building up the story of how unfair life is again.

The Buddha's advice is very simple. For example, he notes a mind affected by anger as a mind affected by anger. There is no judgment required. Simple acknowledgement of our afflicted mind states is all that is required. Judgment tends to contract us further. But of course, we can't undo our habit of judging so easily. So whenever we sense that we're adding the second arrow of self-judgment, we simply let attention graze in the feel of judgment, feeling its physical expression in our bodies as well as whatever emotions show up—disapproval, self-disgust, self-hatred. From the point of view of insight, all these are equally welcome. Wisdom grows as we witness these.

The sutta also advises us to note the absence of mind states like greed and anger. This isn't something we often do. We tend only to notice our minds when they're troubled, not when they're clear and at ease. But noticing the absence of trouble helps us appreciate those states. We find it easier to let go of excitement, for example, when we learn to appreciate the pleasantness of being calm.

Just now, for example, are you angry? If not, note "not angry, not angry," and get a felt sense of that mental state. Similarly, you could ask yourself if your mind is excited, wanting more stimulation. If not, note "not excited, not excited." We need to get to know these unobtrusive mind states. Our minds like familiarity. What the mind knows and is familiar with, it comes back to again and again.

Apart from the variations on greed and anger, our minds can be deluded, thinking there is a very powerful "me" in control of all my experience.

Again, we can simply note this as "delusion, delusion." The belief and the felt experience may be the same, but they have now been brought within the pasture for wisdom to graze upon. Very gradually, the wild geese nibble away at our delusions.

Similarly, we can note the presence or absence of sleepiness, restlessness, distraction, concentration, peacefulness, and any mind state. The Buddha then repeats the refrain, reiterating that insight can be gained as we note the presence or absence of our mind states, as we sense them arise and pass away, or as we simply ground ourselves in the knowledge that there is a mind without any attempt to be more discerning than that. The latter is the kind of light-touch mindfulness we need when any attempt to probe more deeply would disturb the experience.

The final pasture is called Dhammas, and there is considerable controversy about how to translate this term. The Dhamma is the teaching of the Buddha and is usually spelled with a capital D. But the word *dhammas* here is plural and with a small d. The classical translation is "mind objects," but that is not very helpful since all the other pastures can also be described as mind objects—we make the body, feelings, and mind into objects for contemplation in those pastures. Recently, the translation "categories of experience" is gaining favor, but that is not very elegant. It is hard to relate to.

Looking ahead to see what the pasture describes, it is actually a number of the Buddha's teachings. The teachings he picks out include the hindrances, the factors of enlightenment, and the four noble truths, as well as two more which we will discuss over the next two evenings. In my simple way of thinking, I can see why we don't call this pasture "the Dhamma," because here we are in fact contemplating the central core of the Buddha's teachings.

Whatever we call it, this last pasture asks us to let our attention dwell on the moment-to-moment experience of the hindrances, factors of enlightenment, four noble truths, and other teachings. This makes it abundantly clear that these teachings are not simply lists of human attributes or philosophical statements. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta clarifies that we must know and understand these teachings within the realm of our indi-

vidual subjective experience. We are to let our attention dwell on these teachings as they manifest in our body and mind, ingesting their wisdom moment by moment until we eventually see these from the Buddha's point of view. This is what it means to be a follower of the Buddha.

I am not going to say any more about this pasture tonight, because all the teachings mentioned here are explored in other talks. Let us just skip to the conclusion of the sutta, where the Buddha assures us that if we can explore our experience according to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta for just seven days, we will have deep, deep insight—perhaps even full liberation.

Luckily, there are still seven days left in this retreat. So now you know what you have to do. Persuade yourself to be an ardent lover of truth. Bring your mindful intelligence to the quest for truth. Put aside your worldly cares, or if they refuse to subside, let them become the focus for meditation. Draw your mind into whichever posture beckons you. When you are settled, start exploring the transient nature of your experience. Lighten the attention to bare registration of the posture when you feel that would suit the situation best.

That is all. As Bhante would say, easy-weezy-peasy.

May your exploration of the four pastures for mindfulness bring you to full enlightenment in this very lifetime.

CHAPTER 18

Attachment: The Five Khandhā

Noirin Sheahan · 47 min

In this retreat talk, Nóirín Sheahan offers a comprehensive exploration of the pañcupādānakkhandhā—the five aggregates of clinging—presenting them as a cross-section of experience that reveals what we cling to in our futile search for security. Using the striking metaphor of free fall from an aeroplane, she illustrates how we desperately grasp at material form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa), only to discover that true freedom lies in learning to enjoy the fall rather than clutching at passing objects.

The talk systematically examines each khandha, showing how attachment to material possessions, pleasant feelings, perceptions of self, habitual emotional patterns, and even the witnessing consciousness all generate dukkha. Sheahan connects this teaching to the wheel of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), explaining how vedanā serves as the crucial link where desire can be interrupted. She shares personal experiences from retreat practice—moments of non-attachment while drying dishes, insights into the separation of consciousness fields while walking—that illuminate how mindfulness reveals the constructed nature of our experience.

Particularly valuable is her treatment of anattā (not-self), including D.E. Harding's famous 'headless' experience, and her practical guidance on working with saṅkhārā (mental formations) and their connection to kamma. The teaching offers retreatants a framework for understanding how all clinging ultimately seeks pleasant vedanā, while pointing toward the profound peace available when we stop scrabbling through these five heaps and discover the stability that comes from knowing life's fundamental instability.

Tonight I want to talk about the five khandha, a teaching often translated as the five aggregates of clinging. By now I am sure you are aware that clinging to our experience as "me" and "mine" causes suffering.

This is expressed in the second noble truth: that desire is the cause of suffering. Unless we can see desire as it arises, it generates a sense of self, and this newly created "me" devotes all my energy to trying to get more of the pleasure and get rid of the pain or distress. But this is stressful. In moments of equanimity, when we can let things arise and pass away, we get a taste of freedom, a glimpse of the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering.

All of the Buddha's teachings concern suffering and the end of suffering, but each time he gives us a slightly different perspective on this central theme. The better we get to know them all, the more choice we have in finding one to suit our circumstances. For example, the wheel of dependent origination focuses on the step-by-step process which ends up in dukkha. We notice these links when our attention is drawn into a momentary experience of one thing leading to another. By contrast, the teaching on the khandha focuses on what it is we are clinging to. It's like taking a cross-section through our experience at any one time. The wheel looks at detail to find out how we create suffering. The khandha looks more broadly to discover what we are clinging to.

The word khandha is usually translated as an aggregate, which means an amalgamation of many separate elements. Aggregate is not such a common word, but sounds good by comparison to another translation of khandha as a heap. It's not very flattering to think of ourselves scrabbling round in five heaps of stuff as we make our way through life, but maybe this is a poignant image for our predicament.

The first of these heaps consists of material form. The second of vedanā or feeling. The third is composed of our perceptions. The fourth is our habitual tendencies or saṅkhāra. And finally we have consciousness. These five heaps cover all of our experience in life apart from the experience of nibbāna. We cling to the khandha because we don't see their basic characteristics of anicca and anattā.

One metaphor which is often used to convey the true nature of anicca, dukkha, and anattā is that of free fall. Everything is slipping away at a great rate and you're completely out of control. There's nothing you can cling to. It's all disappearing too quickly. At first you're scared stiff because of the crash to earth you are anticipating, but in our fall into the reality of the three characteristics, the crash never comes. Bit by bit we learn to relax and enjoy the experience.

So now I'm asking you to stretch your imagination and think of your whole life as a long fall out of an aeroplane. Everything is slipping by at an alarming rate. Nothing gives any stability. You're spinning and tumbling out of control. You reach out in a vain effort to find anything that could slow things down.

Suppose there are various objects that offer hope. Falling through a flock of geese, you could clutch at a few legs. The birds get dragged downwards, but they slow your fall and even hold you steady for a while. Relief. But then the rest of the flock descends to rescue the tethered geese by pecking at you so that you have to let go. You land on the wing of a glider plane. This offers a few moments' bumpy ride, but your weight tips

the plane over so you get ejected. Again and again you reach out for whatever will give you stability. These images represent our attempt to cling to the first khandha, material form.

If you were a very astute free faller, you would have noticed that you feel good when you're managing to cling on, and you would realize it's the feel-good you really want, and start wondering whether there are easier ways of getting that pleasure. Now you are intent on clinging to the second khandha, vedanā or feeling, as a means of coping with the reality of ultimate doom. You have found one way of getting a pleasant feeling from the temporary security offered by material form. But all that pecking from wild geese is no fun, and the bumpy rides are very bumpy, so you start looking around for other ways to help you feel good.

You notice that turning on your back helps. The sky looks much more stable than the fast approaching ground. Also, you come across a nice little heap of glasses and lenses that are falling to earth around you. Putting on rose-tinted spectacles certainly helps. And also looking through lenses that make the ground seem far away. All these allow you to change your perception of the situation. So now you're clinging to the third khandha, perception. You're choosing the perceptions of life that help you feel safe and secure.

But sometimes you can't find the right glasses, and you notice that certain thoughts and patterns of behaviour also help you cope. For example, roaring and shouting about how awful and unfair it is that you fell from the plane gives you a bit of a buzz. And luckily, for the first few years of your free fall, there's a kind mother figure falling to earth alongside you who never fails to respond with milk and biscuits. So now you're clinging to the fourth khandha, habitual behaviour, saṅkhāra. You're developing habits that give you a fleeting quick fix of pleasure.

But roaring and shouting gives you a headache, so as a last resort you turn to mindfulness. You learn to watch your experience without interfering. Things get peaceful. There's a soothing sense of simply being an observer, slightly aloof from the drama of your life. Now you are clinging to the last khandha, consciousness. Again, this gives that all-important hit of pleasant feeling. But sooner or later you lose the balance of mind that allows the impartial observer stance and get all embroiled in the drama again. In dismay you look around for some passing geese to grab hold of, or a pair of spectacles.

This gives a crude image of our life as a vain effort to give ourselves a temporary illusion that things are going our way, that we are in control, and that we will somehow survive this doomed fall to earth. We grab hold of whatever will help us feel good.

Practising with the khandhas is like learning to enjoy the free fall. To our enormous relief, we discover that the ground is also an illusion. So we're free-falling, without danger of a sudden crash. To make this discovery, we need to get to know the khandhas. What are these features of experience which delude us into thinking they could provide a secure abode within the reality of anicca, dukkha, anattā? Can we feel the stress involved in clinging? Can we learn not to panic when they eventually let us down and we sense the free fall?

With continued attention to experience, these in-between moments of non-clinging become clearer and less terrifying. This is how we learn to enjoy the free fall. As we sensitize ourselves to the contrasting experiences of clinging and non-clinging, the Buddha assures us our nature automatically shifts towards non-clinging. We become happier and more content. Ultimately, we become enlightened, meaning we have been liberated from the futility of clinging.

So let's have a look at the first khandha, material form. This includes the body and all its sense bases—eyes, ears, and so on—as well as the external material world: earth, plants, animals, mountains, houses, cars, computers, mobile phones, food. Anything we can touch or see or hear or smell or taste is part of this first khandha.

We cling very tenaciously to the material form of our own body. Notice all the thoughts and emotions resulting from a headache or other pain. Any illness is a great teacher about how we cling to our bodies. We usually build our future around being able to walk, run, lift, carry—not to mention hear, see, eat, and talk. We get quite a shock if any of these fail. There's no way around the dukkha, but we can experience it moment by moment and let it teach us about the mistake we're making in assuming we can rely on our bodies to support our agenda in life.

And we accumulate so much material form around us in life: house, car, mobile phones, clothes, garden, books, furniture. Often we don't notice our attachment to these until we lose them or they let us down in some way. If the car breaks down, or someone breaks into your house and steals the TV, there will probably be a lot of dukkha to endure.

One mistake that's easy to make when we hear this teaching is to start disdaining the material world, including our own body, as the source of dukkha. This is a mistake. Neither the world nor our body cause dukkha—only our mistaken belief that they can offer us permanent support and be the basis for a happy life. The Buddha asks us to treat these with care and respect. It's only in an intimate, caring relationship with our bodies and the material world that we experience how we stress ourselves out in the effort to grasp these as me or mine. We can't learn that from a distance.

To encourage this positive relationship, think of your daily activities as an aspect of mettā for the material world. When you are eating, doing yoga, washing your hands, do all these in a spirit of self-care. In your daily chores, can you do them as an act of gratitude for the safety and ease the physical structure of Satipañña offers us? We wouldn't be here in retreat if the walls and roof weren't holding together, or if we had no plates to hold our dinner. If you're doing some gardening, can you see this as adding beauty to the world? When you take a walk around the meadows during the break times, can you see this as an act of appreciation for the material world around you? Trees, sky, ground, wildlife.

Let's look now at the second khandha, vedanā or feeling. We've already come across vedanā as one of the steps in the wheel of dependent origination. Vedanā describes the way we categorize sensations as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If we don't tune into vedanā, our system moves on to the next link in the wheel, generating desire for pleasant vedanā, aversion to unpleasant, and ignoring the neutral. Once this wheel has moved past vedanā, it gets progressively more difficult to stop before it ends up at dukkha.

By contrast, if we learn to tune into the basic pleasure-displeasure-neutrality of sense contacts—and know from experience the pain of dukkha—we can persuade ourselves to enjoy the pleasant without clinging, to bear with the unpleasant without pushing away, and to pay close attention to the neutral, because the lack of stimulation is very relieving to our frazzled nerves.

In fact, clinging to all the other khandhas boils down to clinging to vedanā, as explained in the teaching on the wheel of dependent origination. So why do we study all the other khandhas? It's because we're so deeply enmeshed with these that we rarely notice the feeling-reaction coupling at the core. But reflecting on the khandhas helps us see through the illusion we are creating.

For example, take material form. Imagine primitive man making his way northwards across Europe. It gets wetter and colder—unpleasant vedana—so he builds himself a hut to shelter in. The hut becomes associated with pleasant vedana. He likes it. He starts to think of it as home. Fast forward to our modern homes that we work forty years to pay for, with all their decor and furniture and gardens. This attachment covers a huge section of our life. We think it's the house, the garden, that we want and need. But actually it's the pleasant vedana these give us—from physical sensations like warmth and comfort, and from concepts like security, safety, and status that generate more pleasant vedana.

If we are lucky enough to have somewhere we can call home, reflecting on our relationship with it will bring up pleasant thoughts of being cosy and secure, and the very unpleasant thoughts of losing our home. To reflect mindfully, we have to keep letting go of whatever desires might arise—for instance, to paint the house. If we hadn't made the effort to be mindful, the thought of our home could have turned the wheel all the way to birth, and we would be out painting the house before we knew where we were. And of course, the rain and wind would eventually destroy our careful painting, so the wheel would turn on to dukkha.

By reflecting on the khanda of material form, we are learning to let the wheel come to rest at the point of vedana while we think of our home and other possessions. This purifies our relationship with the first khanda. We become more appreciative of our possessions. We enjoy them more fully and are not quite so dismayed and appalled when they go the way of all things into the abyss of loss and decay. We paint the house mindfully, knowing all our efforts will come to naught—apart, that is, from the effort to be mindful. That's the one that will pay dividends.

It's the same with the other khandas. We bind ourselves to these for the sake of the pleasant vedana they offer. Vedana is really the key to unlock the chain binding us to suffering. So during retreat here this week, really try to sensitise yourself to the pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality resulting from physical sensations and the mental world of thoughts, ideas, and memories. The better you can do this on retreat, the easier it will be to reflect on the khandas mindfully afterwards, feeling the associated pleasant and unpleasant feelings as we think about these and the role they play in our life. Reflecting like this teaches us the futility of clinging. The wheel comes to halt more and more often at the point of vedana as we contemplate the khandas.

Let's go on to look at the third khanda: perception. A perception is the mind's attempt to categorize whatever stimulus it receives. For example, a certain pattern of pressures falls on the eardrum and the mind recognizes a ringing tone. One teacher uses the image of a filing cabinet to illustrate this khanda. Whatever comes in has to be sorted into its correct file. The more attached we are to this khanda, the more time we spend with our back turned to the incoming sense data, ignoring most of them in favour of a preoccupation with files and sub-files and finding the exact category for each sensation.

The stimulus can be mental as well as physical. Suppose some loud, high-pitched vibrations impact on the ear and we perceive these as a ringing tone. The perception "ringing tone" in turn stimulates the mind to do some further classification, perhaps comparing this vibration with the memory of our house alarm and alarm clock before

ending up with the concept "doorbell." A concept is a mental amalgamation of the memory of many perceptions, cemented by beliefs and culture. Primitive man, for example, would not have had the concept "doorbell," and if he heard one, might have been sorting through his memory of birdsongs trying to recognise this peculiarly shrill one.

Concepts get strung together to form thoughts and mental images. A pattern of light, shade, and colour falls on the eye and the mind recognises our neighbour's face, and we think, "Here's John from down the road." It's truly amazing how the mind can recognise and classify the complex patterns of sight and smell and sound that it is bombarded with each moment. But each perception is just a guess at the reality that stimulated it—like my seeing the red cloth brushing the floor and my mind constructing a life-size image of Bhante Bodhidharma, as I explained in another talk.

So perceptions, with their resulting concepts, mental images, and thoughts, are very, very clever guesswork based on what we remember, what we believe to be likely, and some incoming data from the senses. They impose a structure on the world that we would swear to be true. And this can certainly be helpful—for example, we need to recognise a certain pattern of light as a cup in order to drink tea. Could we accept our perceptions as helpful, clever ways to represent reality, but nothing more than that? A temporary classification which needs to be continually reconfirmed by checking against our sensory input? Then we wouldn't get so startled when the cup shatters into little pieces, spilling all the tea.

Take, for example, our deeply held belief that there's someone called "me" whose location is probably within or nearby my body—a "me" who is, or should be, in control of my body and my life. The Buddha taught that this perception of self is created as part of the reaction to vedana. In order to get what it wants, or get rid of what it doesn't want, the mind-body complex lets desire generate a perception of a self that can take decisions and get the body into action. It's a wonderfully clever way that our biology has found to satisfy its needs.

Despite our deep belief in the reality of "me," the Buddha teaches that the real truth is anatta—not-self. This is a very difficult teaching to get our heads around. But some people have sudden insights into anatta.

While walking in the Himalayas, D.E. Harding experienced a moment in which all his mental chatter died down. "As if I had been born that instant, innocent of all memories." He looked down to find a pair of trouser legs terminating in a pair of brown shoes, sleeves terminating sideways in a pair of pink hands, and a shirt front terminating in nothing whatsoever. But this nothing, this hole where his head should have been,

was no ordinary vacancy. The emptiness was filled with mountains, trees and sky—everything in his visual field. He had lost a head and gained a world. There arose no questions, he said, but only peace and a quiet joy, and the sensation of having dropped an intolerable burden.

The perception of anattā is a very beautiful one, which can arise quite naturally when the mental chatter dies down. But the thought of anattā is often unsettling or even frightening. The Buddha never answered questions of the form "Do I exist?" or "Is there a self?" but asked people to experience for themselves that the perception of self is conditional. It arises when there is a desire for whatever vedanā is felt.

The sense of self, like all perceptions, is the mind's guess at how to interpret present reality. When a pattern of black and yellow light strikes the eye and gives rise to the very unpleasant thought of a tiger about to pounce, it makes a lot of sense to get our biological act together—using the concept of me being in control and putting all my energy into escaping. And if the tiger catches us and we see we're doomed, it makes sense to change our minds and see that this painful, frightened entity is not our true self. In that sublime state, we could even wish the tiger bon appétit!

Can we see the self as a temporary, provisional, best guess at interpreting present reality? Very helpful at times, but not the ultimate truth. Can we see it wax and wane as circumstances dictate? For example, the way a sense of me suddenly blossoms when something nice happens. It's very interesting to note that you didn't remark on its absence before the sudden blossoming. The experience of not-self is very subtle and unobtrusive—that's why we don't notice it. It's quite an unremarkable experience, until we think about it. The experience of self, on the other hand, always calls attention, even if it's an unpleasant experience—for example, the way that sense of me crumples or rears up in anger when something unpleasant happens.

Let's look now at the fourth khandha: saṅkhāra. There are many translations for saṅkhāra—mental formations, mental factors, mental habits, habitual tendencies, even concoctions. In everyday language we refer to some of these as moods and emotions, such as depression, anger, love, joy. Others, such as laziness, we might think of as a state of mind, while others, such as wisdom, we might think of as a mental attribute.

Each moment the saṅkhārā change with the circumstances we find ourselves in, but each of us favours different sets. Some of us have a tendency towards anger, others towards delusion, others towards joy. Our characters and personalities are determined by our saṅkhārā. Some saṅkhārā are unwholesome in the sense that they lead to suffering. Others lead towards nibbāna—these are termed beautiful saṅkhārā. Still others are ethically neutral; they can be present in either wholesome or unwholesome states.

One of the neutral saṅkhārā is volition, which is particularly important because it links with kamma, the ethical force at work in life. Volition, also translated as intention or will, factors into every conscious moment. Even seeing and hearing are intentional. So every moment we are sowing kamma for ourselves.

Kamma is like a seed; it ripens as fruit. Actions or speech motivated by kindness or other beautiful qualities ripen as various forms of happiness. Actions motivated by hatred or other unwholesome qualities ripen as unhappiness. Kamma ripens in many ways, but perhaps the most important is the type of saṅkhārā it develops. If we're motivated by greed to steal someone's wallet, we develop habits of greed, deceitfulness, shamelessness, among others. If we're motivated by kindness to care for a sick child, we develop habits such as patience, compassion, love.

It is the motivation that matters, not the act itself. If we care for the child because we feel trapped in this role and we let resentment show, making cruel remarks now and then, we develop cruelty and resentment rather than beautiful saṅkhārā.

Non-attachment and non-hatred are amongst the beautiful saṅkhārā. These are very unexciting terms, but I had a striking demonstration of the beauty of non-attachment during one retreat. There was a bed of wildflowers in the garden, and I was enthralled by the gorgeous colours. But my mind would get lost in thoughts of sowing a flower bed like this at home, and surely my friends would want one too, and on and on it went until I was tense with anxiety about these future gardens. Although the scene in front of me was beautiful, I felt contorted by tension. I sadly decided I would have to forgo the gorgeous flower bed if I was to get any peace of mind.

Then one day as I was drying dishes, there was a moment where I simply felt the weight of the cup and the softness of the cloth, and my mind expanded into a beautiful freedom. It was a moment without attachment, but one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. I had never realised how much I was clinging until I experienced that one moment of non-attachment.

Comparing this with my experience at the flower bed, I could see that attachment leads to misery, while non-attachment allows perfect contentment.

Non-hatred also sounds mundane but can be put in more positive language as friendliness, kindness, love, and patience. As you would expect, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy are also among the beautiful states of mind.

We cling to these *khandhas* by identifying ourselves with our emotions and mind states, thinking "I am angry," "I am happy," "I am sleepy." The truth of the matter is that these are temporary states of mind which arise because of certain conditions and cease

when these conditions pass away. When we become closely identified with any mind state, we become blind to any alternative way of viewing the situation, and the mind loses its flexibility.

During a long car journey I was feeling a bit sick and very grumpy. A friend smiled and made some pleasantry. For a moment I forgot to be grumpy and my heart lifted—but then I remembered "I am grumpy" and started sinking back into the state. But that momentary lift showed me the state wasn't the absolute truth, and I could make the effort to be sociable. I found myself resisting, feeling it would be disloyal to my grumpy self, who deserved my loyalty. On digesting this, my sociability-related *saṅkhāras* won out over my self-loyalty ones, and I decided to perk up a bit.

As always, mindfulness is the key to seeing through delusion—in this case, the belief that "I am grumpy," rather than a more accurate belief such as "grumpiness is here now, but conditions could change."

It's also easy to cling to *saṅkhāras* like love, joy, compassion, and understanding, not seeing how these come and go depending on circumstances. When we've had a good meal or heard some good news, we can feel kind, happy, and understanding. It's so tempting to believe this is the real me. But then there is shock and grief when this wonderful state breaks down again. Can we notice the beautiful *saṅkhāras* objectively, enjoying them while they last, letting them go when the conditions change? It's a tough practice. We have to let everything go for the sake of complete freedom.

This brings us to the last of the *khandhas*: consciousness. To be conscious is to experience the other four *khandhas*, the sensory world around us and the mental world within. If we are unconscious, this experience vanishes. This is the sense in which the term consciousness is used when it refers to the fifth *khandha*. Consciousness can also be used to refer to the experience of *nibbāna*, but that's not included in the *khandhas*. The *khandhas* only describe what we cling to, and *nibbāna* is what we're left with when we stop clinging to them.

Consciousness is often likened to a screen on which a film is projected. The light from the projector has to fall on the screen if we are to see the scenery and characters. If there was no screen, the light would just pass through, and if there were no dust in the air to scatter it, the light beam would be invisible—it would make no impact on us. In the same way, the various dramas of our lives, as well as their component parts of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, body sensations, and mental activity, all have to project onto the screen of consciousness to have any impact on us.

Is there a difference between consciousness, awareness, and mindfulness? Sometimes the words are used interchangeably, so it can be confusing. For this talk, I use awareness and mindfulness interchangeably. We all know that we can be conscious though not mindful—we are on autopilot, letting the mind run away on thoughts but not noticing that these thoughts are just part of our present experience. Going back to the movie analogy, it's as if we're in the movie, playing our role, feeling our feelings, totally immersed in the plot.

Mindfulness turns attention to our conscious experience, and the mind starts taking an interest in what's being projected on the screen. It's often described as a different level of consciousness. We can have stretches where we see the film quite objectively, like watching ourselves acting in the movie of our lives. Then we lose mindfulness and get sucked into some aspect of the plot that was on the screen, acting it all out with gusto.

The Buddha taught that there are six separate doorways to consciousness, involving the five senses and also the mind—for example, when a thought or memory falls on the screen of consciousness. Certain conditions have to be fulfilled for each door to open. In order to hear a bird song, for example, we need the bird to sing, good hearing, as well as attention. If any of these is missing, then hearing consciousness does not happen. Although we say, "Isn't the silence beautiful," we can't actually hear silence. Perhaps what we're enjoying is the absence of hearing consciousness.

It's the same for all the other senses. We need the sense object, sensory physiology, and attention. Sight, sound, body sensations, smell, taste, and mental activities—all of these are separate doorways to conscious experience. But they are completely separate, independent experiences.

I first noticed this separation of the different fields of consciousness one time while walking during a retreat. I was noting the feeling of the feet swinging forward and stepping down onto the ground.

So my attention was on body consciousness. But then I suddenly saw the tip of my foot appearing and disappearing as I felt it come to the end of the forward swing. I found myself amazed that these experiences coincided so perfectly.

Before that, I would never have questioned that the sight and feel of the foot would coincide. But now I could sense that logical expectations, sight, and bodily sensations were occupying three separate worlds. It seemed a pure wonder and an incredible gift that they all fitted into each other so neatly. I was tasting the separation of consciousness into its six fields.

See if you can tune into the different fields of consciousness—for example, vision, hearing, and bodily experience. Joseph Goldstein recommends using noting phrases of the form "sounds being known," "walking being known," and so on, to turn attention towards that entity which registers experience. Can you get a sense of how separate are the worlds of hearing, seeing, and physical sensing?

The Buddha also taught that we only experience one doorway for consciousness at a time—sight or sound or smell or mental activity. But this is all happening at such a fast rate that we don't notice the separate registrations.

Once I was walking towards a door to open it, feeling the feet lifting, moving. Then my hand went out to grasp the handle of the door—touching, turning, turning, pushing, pushing. Then my foot lifted to take another step. At the moment I felt the foot lift, I realized my hand had disappeared totally from consciousness. I got such a fright I looked down to see if my hand had dropped off. But it was still there, and I realized it was simply that perception had sharpened so that I was experiencing just one sensation at a time.

These kinds of experiences undermine our usual fascination with the plot that's playing on the screen of consciousness and make us wonder about the nature of consciousness itself. To study this fifth khandha, we need to calm ourselves in meditation sufficiently to extract ourselves from the fascination of the plot and simply watch the film. Then at times we might relax enough to get a sense of what often feels like a more stable sense of self—the one who watches the film, the one who knows experience, the observer, the witness.

At those moments we're noticing our identification with the fifth khandha. We sense "this is happening within me" or "I am observing all this." Bhante uses the analogy of looking through a shop window. You see the goods inside but might also notice your own reflection as you watch. If the stuff for sale doesn't appeal, you might get more interested in your own face. In the same way, when our consciousness film is not too exciting, we can bring attention to the sense of "me," the one who experiences, observes, and knows all this. Although at first it feels like a deep and reliable sense of self, it also begins to shift and slide when the spotlight turns upon it. So we begin to lose faith in this final khandha as a stable source of happiness.

At other times we lose that sense of watching the screen but remain mindful. We feel more intimate with sensations and feelings. They're no longer "out there" on the screen for "me" to watch. This is the loss of identity with the fifth khandha. Sensations and feelings arise and pass just as before, but no one is watching anymore. It's an experience of anattā.

Our whole system functions just fine without the usual sense of "me" being in charge or watching the film. In our earlier analogy, we're now tasting freefall, no longer clinging even to this fifth khandha for security. Each sensation of life is intimately known, but there's no central control system, no observer, no one knowing. We glimpse the state of non-clinging, the end of suffering, nibbāna.

However, until our trust in this state deepens to total enlightenment, the sense of self sooner or later rears its head again as we start clinging to familiar experiences to help us feel secure.

Studying the khandhas helps us to discover what it is we cling to, unwittingly creating dukkha in the process. Ultimately, all our clinging boils down to wanting to feel good, clinging to pleasant vedanā. In an effort to do this, we scrabble around in the heap of material form, buying goods, nice clothes, makeup, in an effort to feel secure about our bodies and our material well-being. Or else we polish our spectacles, choose a new pair of lenses, as we immerse ourselves in the heap of perceptions. At other times we get lost in the heap of saṅkhāra, repeating old habits in an effort to get things stable. When we're relaxed and mindful, we fall into the heap of consciousness, concocting stability from the illusion that there's someone called "me" who experiences "my" life.

The good news is that deeper awareness of our habit of clinging—and how much it hurts—makes us more willing to let go and freefall with the truths of anicca, dukkha, anattā. We get more curious about the state of non-clinging. Instead of the temporary highs offered by the khandhas, we become enthralled by the possibility of letting these slip through our fingers. We discover the stability offered by knowing the instability of life.

May these reflections on the five khandhas help us experience the joy of non-clinging.

CHAPTER 19

Divine Abiding: Equanimity

Noirin Sheahan · 45 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan offers a comprehensive introduction to brahmavihāra (divine abiding) practice, with particular emphasis on upekkhā (equanimity). She begins by presenting the Buddha's description of these sublime states—mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā—and explores how they relate to the vipassanā practice outlined in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Rather than viewing these as competing approaches, Sheahan demonstrates how they complement each other: vipassanā naturally cultivates the brahmavihāras while formal brahmavihāra practice softens and enriches insight meditation.

Sheahan uses the evocative image of a lake (wisdom) overflowing into a river (goodwill) to illustrate the relationship between these practices. She provides detailed guidance on formal brahmavihāra meditation, including working with different categories of beings—benefactors, close friends, difficult people, and oneself—while addressing common challenges such as romantic attachment, self-criticism, and the near and far enemies of each divine abode.

The talk focuses extensively on equanimity as the brahmavihāra most closely connected to vipassanā and essential for overcoming obstacles in the other three practices. Sheahan explains that equanimity is rooted in wisdom rather than feeling, distinguishing it from both reactivity (its far enemy) and indifference (its near enemy). She offers practical phrases for cultivating equanimity, including reflections on karma, and suggests how to integrate this practice into daily life—from acknowledging grief in life's milestones to maintaining balance in relationships and moods.

So far in this retreat we have been discussing Vipassana meditation, especially as described in the Satipatthana Sutta. For the next few days I want to talk about another approach to meditation described by the Buddha. This is termed Brahma-Vihara practice. The term Brahma-Vihara can be translated as a sublime state or, more poetically, as a heavenly abode.

Here is a passage from the Buddha's teaching on the Brahma-Vihara:

Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with loving kindness. Likewise the second, the third and the fourth direction. So above, below and around. He dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with loving kindness—abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with compassion, likewise the second, and so on as before.

The next verse repeats this for a heart filled with appreciative joy, and the final verse repeats it for a heart filled with equanimity. So in this form of meditation we are not simply observing our experience but deliberately filling our hearts with kindness or compassion or joy or equanimity and radiating these throughout the world.

Some teachers argue that there is no need to practice Brahma-Vihara because Vipassana naturally cultivates these sublime states. In support of this approach, there is the fact that the Satipatthana Sutta does not include a contemplation of the Brahma-Vihara. So this form of meditation is not a necessary component of the direct path to enlightenment. Other teachers put great emphasis on cultivating goodwill and the other sublime states as the attitude needed in order to practice Vipassana. In support of this, there are many teachings the Buddha gives on the importance of goodwill, and I'll mention some of these over the coming days.

So how can we bring these views together? Very often the attempt to fill the heart with loving kindness will show us how difficult this is. And so we have to cope with frustration, perhaps a sense of failure, confusion or anger, and other ways the hindrances show up when we find our wishes are being thwarted. When this happens, I find great relief in the fact that Brahma-Vihara meditation isn't included in the Satipatthana Sutta. I feel perfectly justified in relaxing any effort to generate goodwill. Instead, I sit back and let Vipassana acknowledge and explore these negative reactions.

But I've come to value reflections on goodwill and the other Brahma-Vihara as a way of softening my Vipassana practice. The two approaches complement each other well. The more often we make the effort to cultivate the Brahma-Vihara, the more often this new habit will be expressed quite naturally in Vipassana. Thus the observer is often watching goodwill, compassion, mudita or equanimity being cultivated quite naturally and without any deliberate effort in this direction. Vipassana becomes a relaxed kind of Brahma-Vihara practice.

In formal Brahma-Vihara practice there is the extra effort to bring about wholesome states of mind, but running parallel with this is the observation of whatever emotions are coming up. Then the effort can be softened or stepped up so as not to be overwhelmed by the negative states. Thus the two practices support and complement one another.

Coming back to whether or not we need to practice the Brahma-Vihara in addition to Vipassana, I follow the approach taken by Bhante and other teachers and think of Vipassana as my main practice, but augment this with short stretches of Brahma-Vihara practice, just as we do at night here on retreat. In daily life, the main emphasis is on putting the Brahma-Vihara into action, this effort being supported by mindfulness and continually tailored to suit the particular situation.

The Brahma-Vihara describe the enlightened heart's relationship to others: goodwill, or metta; compassion, the Pali term being karuna; appreciative joy, or mudita in Pali; and equanimity, or upekkha. For this talk I'll use the Pali term metta since that is so widely understood, and also mudita instead of appreciative joy, as that's a bit of a mouthful in English. But I'll just use the English words for compassion and equanimity.

The Brahma-Vihara are the orientations of mind and heart needed to respond appropriately to the ups and downs of human relationships. If we can summon these states at will, we can always be in perfect harmony with others and with whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

As a basis, we have metta, or goodwill. We want all beings to be happy and well. This is the default. Goodwill applies in all situations. If we find a friend in any sort of difficulty, goodwill takes on the shade of compassion. We empathise and wish their suffering will end. On the other hand, we can find them bouncing with good news. Goodwill takes on the hue of mudita. We are delighted for them. If they get involved in another relationship and don't have much time for us, goodwill takes on the form of equanimity. We respect their boundaries and their independence and wish them well in their new life.

The first three have the effect of opening our hearts to others, while the latter provides the balance required to prevent a slide into over-attachment, dependency and other dangers of close relationships.

I'll be saying more about each of the Brahma-Vihara later and over the coming days, but first I want to go over the formal meditation practice, which is identical for all four. Here again is the Buddha's description:

He dwells pervading the entire world, everywhere and equally, with his heart filled with loving kindness—abundant, grown great, measureless, free of enmity and free from distress.

This is a very exalted state he is describing, which can inspire us deeply. But there is a danger.

We might let our imagination be transported to a heavenly realm in a delusive way, clinging to a notion of heavenly bliss which has me as the source of all, as I liberally bestow my good wishes on all around.

To make the practice more real and grounded, we usually start with wishing well to real individuals. These are the various categories of people we think of in our regular metta practice: ourselves, a benefactor, close family and friends, and so on. We start with whoever most easily stirs our friendly feelings.

For many people, this is someone you think of as a benefactor. This could be a parent, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, or grandparent. It could be a teacher or a friend. It could be a favourite pet. Or you could focus on a public figure you admire—Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi. It could be an author or poet whose work you love. Or you could use a spiritual figure: the Buddha, Kuan Yin, Jesus, Mary, or any of the saints.

You can use different benefactors for different Brahma Viharas. For example, the person who best evokes mudita might not be the person who best evokes compassion. For mudita, you would want to be thinking of someone who has something to celebrate, while compassion is most easily stirred when we think of someone going through a tough time.

Then there is the often tricky business of offering ourselves good wishes. Sometimes we think of this as selfish, but this is a misunderstanding. Selfishness means clinging tightly to whatever we desire. In Brahma Vihara practice, we are generous with our good wishes. We are giving without expectation of return. So too, we wish ourselves well without building that into an expectation of what form the future will take for us. It's like the marriage vows: for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer. We are developing an attitude of unconditional support for ourselves in all circumstances. This is not selfish; it is the essential psychological basis for living a good life.

Often we feel we don't deserve any good wishes, that we only deserve to be miserable. What's needed here is self-forgiveness. We can remind ourselves that whatever wrongs we've done, they've happened in the past. They don't have to shape our future. We can't become the good person we feel we ought to be unless we are willing to be-

lieve in our potential for goodness and encourage ourselves in that direction. Paradoxically, the times we feel most unworthy of good wishes are the times we most deeply need them.

At other times we might feel all buoyed up and confident about wishing others well, but feel that it's a waste of time wishing ourselves well. We're fine; we don't need any good wishes. What's actually going on is that we're denying our vulnerability. We're running on willpower, suppressing any suggestions of neediness or frailty. What's needed here is a combination of self-compassion for the underlying feelings and mudita for the streak of self-confidence that is keeping us going.

All in all, the self can be the hardest of all categories for Brahma Vihara practice.

When we come to the category of close friends, it's best to choose someone with whom we have a warm relationship but don't feel a romantic or sexual attraction. The problem with those attractions is that they easily stir strong emotions that swamp our simple goodwill. I say "simple" because it needs to be a pure giving without expectation of return. It's a straightforward good wish like, "I hope all goes well for you."

If we feel romantically or sexually attracted, we're very likely to want the person to think only about us. We're not that interested in the rest of their lives. So our good wishes become a kind of net we're trapping them inside. Though our minds might be saying, "May you be happy," our heart is secretly whispering, "May you love and adore me, because I have your best interests at heart and no one will ever love you as I do." Though we may be able to sustain this focus for a long time, all we are doing really is strengthening the bonds of attachment, not of goodwill.

This is one of the toughest aspects of Brahma Vihara practice: to keep our goodwill simple and pure, with no strings attached. The particular divine state that helps us with this is equanimity, and I'll talk more about that later this evening.

For the moment, let's leave this category of close friend by saying that if you sense a pure, more disinterested attitude of metta has established itself in your mind, then at that point you could start to include those for whom you feel romantic or sexual love. You'll then be able to feel the shift towards possessiveness and know the danger.

The difficult person category presents a different challenge. This time the emotions being stirred up are of the aversive type: anger, condemnation, irritation, fear, hatred. It's best not to start with our worst enemy, but to practice on someone who we find irritating for some reason. It could be easier to start with equanimity-style good wishes, such as "May you not harm yourself or others," before switching to metta-style wishes like "May you be happy."

When we've gone through the various categories of people, we then start radiating spatially, as the Buddha suggests. Again, to keep this grounded in reality, we usually start with our immediate surroundings—like all of us under the same roof.

Then we gradually widen the circle to our neighbourhood, country, continent, and the whole world before encompassing all beings in all directions.

Each Brahmavihara is associated with what are termed its near or subtle enemies and its far or direct enemies. The far enemy is the polar opposite of the divine abode—hatred, cruelty, and so on. The near enemy can easily be mistaken for the truly divine abiding: attachment being mistaken for metta, pity for compassion. Much of the challenge in Brahmavihara practice involves learning to recognize and work around these enemies, as well as all the usual hindrances—wandering mind, aversion, sleepiness.

While Vipassana asks us to turn attention directly on the hindrance, Brahmavihara practice asks us to try to minimize their disturbance. For example, if we get uncomfortable, we don't try to sit it out as we might in Vipassana. We just make ourselves more comfortable. Similarly, we switch back to the least challenging category whenever we get swamped by an enemy. In a sense, we dodge around the challenges and look for the line of least resistance, trusting that perseverance will eventually establish the good habit as our new default.

Let's explore the difference between Brahmavihara and Vipassana meditation practices a little further. In Vipassana, the ultimate aim is to cultivate wisdom. We're following the Buddha's quest to find a way to live happily in a world that includes the decay and death of all we love. We're looking for an escape from stress and suffering. So in Vipassana we look directly at whatever takes our attention in order to see its transient, unsatisfactory nature—and that it's not within our power to control. It is not me or mine. This way of seeing gradually undercuts our habitual attachments. As wisdom deepens, the heart is purified of greed and hatred. In a natural, unforced way, the Brahmaviharas are strengthened. Vipassana also gives us glimpses of what might not be transitory or unsatisfactory. We're learning to escape moment by moment from the limitations of being bound up in the world. To the extent that we have loosened the bonds of attachment and aversion, we are free. And freedom, we find, allows a natural friendliness to emerge whenever we think of ourselves or others.

In Brahmavihara practice we are taking a different tack. We are letting our current level of wisdom be expressed in the form of good wishes for ourselves and others.

Think of a lake from which a river flows to the sea. The lake represents wisdom and the river represents goodwill. In Vipassana, the lake is being filled with streams from the mountains. The lake is open, receptive. It doesn't matter whether the streams bring down muck and rocks from the mountains as well. The water lets them all pour in, and that's all that matters. In the clear open space of the lake, the rocks do their rocky thing and sink to the bottom. The muck floats around for a while, releases some of its water, before the solid particles filter down into the bed.

In Brahmavihara meditation, the lake is overflowing its boundaries and pouring itself into the river. At the boundary of the lake and the river there is a bank of rock and muck. At times the lake waters are high and overflow this bank effortlessly. This is when goodwill emerges naturally and easily without any opposing emotions. At other times the bank is showing through, but the lake waters are powerful enough to be sweeping through the muck and rocks in their way. This is when we are putting effort into our Brahmavihara practice, refusing to let ourselves be overcome by whatever emotions are emerging. We're breaking down the banks separating the lake of wisdom from the river of goodwill.

After a while the water level drops to where the bank is more entrenched and firm. The lake waters have to be patient and find little chinks in the bank through which they seep to keep a trickle of river flowing. This is where we're working very sensitively with our emotions in Brahmavihara practice. We're dodging around the tight knots of aversion or desire, loosening them a chink here and there. Although it's hard work, we're eating away at the foundations of the solid bank separating the lake from the river—separating our wisdom from its natural expression of goodwill.

When the lake can't get any flow at all through the bank, it has to wait till it fills up again from the mountain streams. This is when we decide to take a Vipassana break in our metta practice, to get some clear space around whatever emotions have been thrown up.

In Vipassana, we are receptive and open, exploring everything without judgment. Anything goes. In Brahmavihara practice, we're on a mission. We're putting all our energy into goodwill. We're not interested in the shape and texture of what gets in our way. We're only interested in finding a way around it.

Let's look for a moment at some of these rocks that can block up the channel between the lake and the river. Our minds keep wandering, or we fall asleep, or the enemies keep showing up. The temptation is to compound the problem by thinking, "I'm such a rotten person, I can't even wish my best friend well." This is a dead end. We're

unwittingly undermining our goodwill by self-criticism. The teaching on anicca can help here, which says that there is nothing permanent or substantial in what we normally think of as our individual being. Our feelings, emotions—

shift and change with circumstances. So the wandering mind, the emotions of the various enemies that emerge—none of these are mine. None of them constitute me. They come and go depending on conditions.

So instead of blaming yourself, think about the conditions and whether anything could be changed. Would it help to look at a flower, a candle flame, an image? Does goodwill flow more easily when there is a chant playing in the background? Maybe it helps to lie down. Can a gesture help, like putting a hand on your heart? Don't be afraid to experiment. This is another form of metta practice—learning to be kind to ourselves during the frustrations that show up in Brahma-Vihara challenges.

One of the conditions that undermines goodwill is fear of failure. The term "divine abode" can set up high expectations that in themselves bring up the fear of failure. We forget that what we are doing is a practice aimed in the direction of divinity. I suffered from that problem for many years until I accepted that working tenderly with fear of failure was in fact a fully acceptable Brahma-Vihara practice. Metta took on the shade of compassion as I turned toward the fear and found some way of expressing support. The very simple gesture of stroking the back of my hand helped enormously. Although I was feeling small and incompetent, the Brahma-Vihara was being expressed as willingness to accept and work with that. An image of petting a scared puppy also helped.

Remember, we don't have to feel friendly, compassionate, joyful, or equanimous to practice the Brahma-Vihara. As the saying goes, it's the thought that counts—or at times the gesture, like stroking the back of our hands. This simple gesture gradually reassured me that my own goodwill was genuine and reliable and that I didn't have to feel inadequate. Brahma-Vihara practice became much easier when I knew I could turn fear of failure into a practice of compassion.

So far we've been looking at the formal practice, but of course relating to others is a huge component of daily life. We need to let our Brahma-Vihara practice on the cushion find its way into everyday situations. Again, the default is metta. We can make friendly good wishes in all situations. Watching or listening to the news is usually an opportunity for metta to shade toward compassion. If we're stuck in a crowd of cheering football supporters, we can wish that their happiness will continue, even through gritted teeth. This is metta in the shade of mudita. If a friend refuses to listen to our advice, we can remember that they are free to choose their own path in life and wish them well with whatever they choose to do. This is metta in the shade of equanimity.

We can also monitor our mood and respond appropriately. In all situations, we can wish ourselves well. When our mood turns sour, we can take a moment to acknowledge and comfort ourselves as best we can. This is a practice of self-compassion. When we do anything well or someone compliments us, we can take a moment for mudita. If we find ourselves worrying unduly about someone, we can remind ourselves that they have their own lives to live and that they have all the resources they need within themselves for perfect happiness. This is the practice of equanimity.

We can also bring our activities into our practice. As we're switching on the television, we can wish that this will help us feel more connected with the world or help us relax and let go of the stresses of the day. If we're taking a snack, we can wish that this might uplift us and give us the energy and joy we need to carry on. As we're going to meet a friend, we can wish that the encounter will help us both feel happy. Before we go into a meeting, we can wish that the business will benefit all concerned with our work. Whether we are cooking, teaching, repairing machines, emailing, or visiting a friend, all of these can be dedicated to our own and others' welfare.

That has given a general introduction to Brahma-Vihara practice. For the rest of this talk and over the next evenings, we will look more closely at each of the four divine abodes.

I want to start with what's usually left to last: equanimity. The reason I'm starting here is because it's the Brahma-Vihara most closely associated with vipassana. Also, it helps with overcoming the enemies of the other Brahma-Viharas. We've already met with equanimity in the factors of enlightenment. In our wild geese analogy, equanimity was the bird with the wide open wingspan, steadying the rest of the flock through the ups and downs of the journey. When we're looking at Brahma-Vihara, we're seeing how that steadiness can come to our aid and be expressed in our relationships with others.

In everyday language, equanimity is described as mental and emotional stability and composure, even under duress. Equanimity is born of wisdom. It is the imperturbable balance of mind that follows from insight into the true nature of reality. When we understand that letting go of reactivity to pleasure and pain brings peace, we will no longer be so foolish as to react angrily to disappointments or excitedly to life's enticements.

In the face of interpersonal relationships, equanimity sustains us through the loss of loved ones, rejections, insults, seduction, and so on. With equanimity, we can acknowledge evil and danger and take appropriate care without blaming whoever is present-

ing the threat. Similarly, equanimity lets us enjoy all the benefits of knowing intelligent, delightful people without idolizing them or clinging to them in a needy way, fearful of rejection.

Equanimity is often confused with tranquility, which is a felt sense of calm and peace. But equanimity itself is rooted in wisdom, not in feeling. With equanimity, we might feel angry, upset, confused—but we will not act from these feelings. We will bear with them, knowing that just bearing these feelings is the path to deeper wisdom, and therefore deeper happiness and peace.

Equanimity develops as we learn to let go. Consider any of the major steps in life: a child's first day at school, graduation, twenty-first birthday, marriage. In all these, a new phase of life opens while the previous one is lost. Often the grief of loss goes unacknowledged in all the excitement, and so the father still nags his fifty-year-old son about spending too much money, and the sixty-year-old daughter worries whether her mum will like the dress she plans to wear for her retirement party.

Equanimity allows the sorrow within each milestone to be acknowledged. Our grip on our old parent-child roles loosens. The child finds parenting skills within themselves. The parent discovers their own childlike joys. Each sees the other in a new light—with more gratitude and respect, and less expectation.

Just as we need to let go of parent-child roles and demands, each relationship in life requires us to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Our best friend moves abroad. Our sister dies. Our spouse asks for a divorce. These are harsh examples, but in minor ways the bonds of friendship are tested every day. Equanimity provides the spaciousness of heart and mind needed to accommodate all the hurts, misunderstandings, and disappointments inherent in human relationships.

Equanimity also keeps us calm throughout the ups and downs of our internal life. It gives us a wider perspective on our needs, fears, ambitions, and dislikes. We can feel our moods going down without shrinking into despair. And if we wake up soaring with confidence, we are delighted—but we don't zoom into ambitious plans and firm commitments, assuming this is the real me and that we'll never have a moment's misery for the rest of our lives.

The analogy of space is a good way of picturing equanimity. Space doesn't react when daggers and bullets fly through it. Neither does it curl up around sweet cakes, hoarding them against the intruders. Space accommodates pleasant and unpleasant, good and evil.

The far, or direct, enemy of equanimity is reactivity. If equanimity is like space, reactivity is a hard surface that things collide into, exploding on impact. We want things to fit in with the expectations and patterns we feel safe with. When this doesn't happen, the external world hits our wall of reactivity. This hurts. Shrapnel flies all around and others get hurt too, often setting off a chain reaction.

We build walls of reactivity in an attempt to shut out people who push our buttons. We dismiss, ignore, or belittle their approaches. They resent this and poke at us again and again in retaliation. With every hurt we reinforce the walls. We're tense even when they are miles away, because the thought of them isn't miles away. We carry our enemies around with us.

Likewise, when we idolize someone, we unwittingly build walls of reactivity around them. Every word they say, every move they make impacts us deeply. This ends up stifling the relationship. Neither party can breathe freely.

The near, or subtle, enemy of equanimity is indifference. We mistake indifference for equanimity because we don't feel any way disturbed by others. They can be in a rotten temper, but we are able to shrug it off. What they say doesn't matter to us. We barely notice them.

Indifference is actually another wall we build in an effort to shield ourselves from the potential for hurt in human relationships. Although things pass us by without impact, others feel our indifference as coldness and rejection. We can't empathize with people who are bereaved or having a relationship break up. We wonder why they can't just forget it and get on with life. And when a major calamity strikes us, we can't relate to our own confusion and upset. We keep all the emotional turmoil hidden with denial. We can't reach out for help because we don't even know we need any help. Indifference, in its quiet way, can be just as destructive as anger—both for ourselves and for our relationships.

The classic phrase used to develop equanimity is: *All beings are owners of their karma.* An understanding of the law of karma forms the basis for wise relationship.

Ultimately, happiness is a habit of mind, the fruit of good karma—meaning speech, actions, and thoughts motivated by kindness and wisdom. The Brahma-Viharas cultivate happiness, while speech, thought, and deeds motivated by ill-will, greed, and delusion cultivate unhappiness. An angry retort or spiteful remark can give us a temporary feeling of power, but the long-term price is a damaged relationship and a guilty conscience. Happiness rests on a clear conscience and universal goodwill.

The aim of repeating the phrase "all beings are owners of their karma" is to give us a wise perspective, to see that happiness is each person's own responsibility. But *kamasaka* is a very loaded phrase. It could help to break it down. "May I accept the fruits of karma" helps us bear with difficulties, and we can wish the same for others. On the positive side, we could wish "may I sow only good karma for the future" to help us develop new habits leading to happiness, and we can wish the same for others.

If the whole notion of karma seems foreign or confusing, here are a few alternative suggestions. "May we each find our own paths to peace"—I find this helps especially when I'm anxiously worrying about a friend. Perhaps they are, in my view, taking a wrong turn. They have ignored my perfectly reasonable and wise advice and are going to do things their own way. Damn them! To counter the mix of anger, indignation, and anxiety, I repeat, "May we each find our own paths to peace," until I can smile at my deluded insistence that I know the way out of everyone's troubles.

Very much related to this is the phrase "May my wisdom guide me, and your wisdom guide you." It's especially useful after a disagreement. When I find myself repeating my opinions to myself over and over again, I switch to that phrase. It helps me acknowledge the wisdom of my viewpoint in a healthy way that leaves room for the very tiny possibility that the other person might have some wisdom too. In time, I again begin to smile at my arrogance and might even begin to see the other person's point of view.

When someone pushes a button and I feel myself rising up in anger, the phrase "May I not react to your behaviour" saves me from making the situation worse. It pulls attention back to myself, to what is in my long-term interest. Anger, on the other hand, pulls my attention outwards towards the other person and all that I find horrid about them at that moment. By repeating "May I not react to your behaviour," I am reminded that my primary business in life is to follow the Eightfold Path, and it saves me from making a whole lot of unnecessary bad karma.

When there isn't any particular difficulty that I'm trying to combat, the phrase "May I trust my Buddha nature" helps me generate equanimity within myself. I then extend this to others with "May you trust in your Buddha nature." All of these phrases evoke the understanding that we are each responsible for our own happiness and we each have all the resources needed for perfect happiness.

At times, very simple reassurances like "It's all okay" or "Take it easy" give us a measure of tranquility to help us through a challenge without making things worse. Later we can try some of the wisdom phrases suggested above, so as to distill the wisdom from the difficulty.

In the case of formal equanimity meditation, it often works best to start with metta for one of the easier categories and then switch to whatever phrase evokes equanimity. If you're feeling somewhat emotional or out of sorts, it may be easiest to generate equanimity in the categories we usually leave to last in the other Brahma-Viharas—for example, all beings, everyone in the world—and gradually work towards home. It's a question of experimenting to see what works best.

If grief, anger, or other forms of reactivity show up, don't be surprised. This is a natural part of the purification process. We're experiencing the dukkha of close attachment and the difficulty of letting go, of acknowledging the other as an independent being. If possible, continue with the practice, simply noting the reaction without giving it any close attention. If it gets overwhelming, switch to an easier category for a while. If the reactivity persists, try self-equanimity—for example, "May I find my own path to peace" or "It's all okay."

If your mind won't focus and keeps getting lost in thought without any strong underlying emotion, then it means the near enemy is surfacing. Switch to metta until you again sense a connection with the other person, then return to the phrases for equanimity. And if the disturbances continue to overwhelm, switch to vipassana to acknowledge whatever emotion is emerging. When the storm abates somewhat, it might be possible to go back to wishing equanimity for yourself or others.

Finally, let's look at some opportunities to develop equanimity in daily life. If a friend lets us down, our partner takes us for granted, our child refuses to listen to advice, a phrase like "May I not be disturbed by your behaviour" prevents us from digging a pit of anger or self-pity and reminds us that we need to protect ourselves from the bad karma that would follow from reacting unskilfully.

Any parting requires equanimity if it is to be properly acknowledged. Making our small goodbyes meaningful prepares us for the major leave-takings in life. Likewise, new beginnings need equanimity. When we start a new project or relationship, we can easily get lost in a sea of false expectation. The phrase "This too will come to an end" gives us some perspective.

We can also practice equanimity in regard to our moods. "May I bear this karma willingly" could help us through the lows, while "May I enjoy this without expecting it to last"

Can help us through the highs.

We could reflect to see what things we get very uptight around—work, family, some project or hobby. To develop a sense of balance around these, we can tell ourselves "take it easy" whenever we feel ourselves going into overdrive.

We support equanimity when we let go of busyness in favour of relaxing activities—going out for walks in the open air, cups of tea, stretches, bathing, looking out the window. Whatever gives distance and perspective supports equanimity.

Vipassana practice naturally cultivates equanimity, so we should definitely find time for a daily vipassana meditation.

In summary, brahmavihāra meditation allows the wisdom we gain through vipassana to be expressed as love and care for the world. Three of the brahmavihāras—mettā, compassion, and muditā—work on our natural desire to connect with others. However, until we are fully enlightened, our love for others will be mixed up with our own needs for security.

To help disentangle the knot, we have the brahmavihāra of equanimity. This divine abode rests on the knowledge that each being is responsible for his or her own happiness. We cannot live other people's lives for them. We must keep remembering to let go of others and prioritise our own spiritual needs. This focus on our own path makes us more open and honest with others, which is in itself a very important aspect of kindness.

With equanimity, we allow more space in our close personal relationships, and we can bear to take the sufferings of the world to heart without being overwhelmed.

May our work with the brahmavihāras let our wisdom transform into loving relationships with all beings.

CHAPTER 20

Divine Abiding: Goodwill, Mettā - read by Biddy O'Connell

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

> *In this comprehensive retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan delves deeply into mettā (loving-kindness or goodwill) as the foundational quality of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes). She explores the various translations and expressions of mettā—from inoffensiveness and non-harming to open-hearted warmth and benevolence—using the Buddha's analogy of an ideal mother's unconditional love for her only child. The talk emphasizes that true mettā is altruistic and universal, extending equally to strangers, animals, those who have wronged us, and ourselves.*
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> *Sheahan offers practical guidance on mettā meditation, including working with the traditional phrases and alternative approaches such as visualization or breath-based practice. She examines the far enemy of mettā (ill-will in all its manifestations from mild irritation to murderous rage) and the near enemy (attachment and emotional neediness), providing skillful strategies for working with both. The talk references the Mettā Sutta and the story of monks whose forest dwelling was inhabited by hostile spirits who were transformed through the practice of mettā.*
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> *Particularly valuable is the exploration of kalyāṇa mitta (spiritual friendship), drawing on the Buddha's teaching to Ānanda that admirable friendship is "the whole of the holy life." Sheahan shares personal examples of how we can learn to recognize and emulate virtues in our friends, even when this challenges our habitual patterns of begrudging or self-doubt. The talk concludes with an invitation to develop devotional practice—contemplating the Buddha's life and qualities as a form of mettā practice, allowing ourselves to "fall in love with the Buddha" while remaining mindful of the hindrances that arise.*

I want to continue the exploration of the four divine abodes, which in Pali are known as the Brahma Vihara. The focus tonight is on Mettā, which is the basis for all the Brahma Vihara.

Mettā is often translated as loving-kindness, or more simply as goodwill. It can also be described as inoffensiveness and non-harming. In positive terms, it describes an open-hearted attitude, warmth, friendliness, benevolence, care. The analogy the Buddha gives is the ideal mother's love for her only child. She is totally devoted, giving

attention and affection without expecting anything in return. She forgives misbehaviour instantly and harbours no resentment. That is the ideal we have to aim at—quite a challenge.

True mettā is based on altruism rather than mundane self-interest. It is universal, applying to strangers, animals, and other beings as much as to ourselves and our closest family and friends, to those who have wronged us as much as to those who have cared for us. When the heart is filled with mettā, it brings out the best in us and others. Life seems simple. We smile, we're interested in the other person, we're easily pleased, we speak and act benevolently in any company. The fall from grace only comes when we perceive others or the world as threatening.

All of our spiritual practice is aimed towards understanding that our essential nature cannot be threatened. When we are fully enlightened, mettā will be our natural state. Until then, mettā practice helps us coax and cajole ourselves in this direction. We don't have to feel happy and benevolent to practice mettā. It's the kindly thought or act that counts, not the feeling. We can feel miserable but still do our best to make things pleasant and easy for ourselves and others.

It is said that the Buddha taught the Metta Sutta to monks whose forest dwelling was also the home of evil spirits who were trying to frighten them away with noises, visions, and stinking odours. When the monks started practicing mettā, they were probably feeling scared stiff rather than in any way kindly. Nevertheless, the spirits began to calm down and eventually came to worship the monks as their benefactors. Mettā softens not only our own hearts but also the hearts of those around us.

The far enemy of mettā is ill-will, which can manifest in many different hues and intensities: mild irritation, impatience, exasperation, despising, fear, blame, hatred, and all the way up to murderous rage. Its expression depends on personality and circumstances. Sometimes there is an explosion of anger. Sometimes anger is more contained—coldness, withdrawal, sulking, refusing to cooperate. It can be expressed openly or more subtly: sighing heavily, grimacing, speaking ill of the person behind their back, undermining them.

All expressions of anger, open or subtle, endanger our relationships. Well-meaning friends become wary of us and may lose touch altogether. On the other hand, anger attracts people with a negative disposition, who then further exacerbate our own ill-will. Negativity escalates as tit-for-tat reactions spark between quarrelling parties. It can spread like wildfire and turn into chronic feuds and gangland violence. On a large scale, we end up with the atrocities of war.

Ill-will can also be directed inwards towards ourselves. We blame ourselves for our lack of success, our financial problems, our poor health, and all the other dukkha in our lives. This might not get us into the trouble that goes with outwardly directed anger, but it can be equally destructive for our well-being. As there is no effective opposition, we can hammer ourselves black and blue without any reprimand. Over time, habits of self-blame can lead to chronic anxiety and depression. We become afraid of our own judgement and feel completely hopeless about life.

The near enemy is attachment. In this case, we are clinging to the other in a needy way. It could be great passion—the beloved becomes the centre and meaning of a person's whole existence. It could be a mother over-protecting her child. At a simpler level, most human relationships involve some degree of anxiety about keeping the relationship on friendly terms.

Attachment can manifest in a variety of ways. We might worry about our beloved's relationships with other people, jealously guarding our own share of their time and affection. We buy them gifts, delightedly anticipating their gratitude. If they go on holidays, we secretly hope they'll miss us. We chatter inanely, anxious for their interest and approval. While attachment is a normal aspect of human relationships, we need to be careful not to foster it. If it gets out of control, it damages the relationship.

The needy person neglects their own development, projecting all their inner goodness and strength onto the other, who in turn feels burdened by those projections and needs.

Mettā meditation is a powerful antidote to all the miseries described above. Here we wish ourselves and others well in four areas of life: basic safety, physical health, mental well-being, and social and family life. The phrases are some variant on "May you be safe, well, happy, living in harmony with the world." We direct these toward all the categories described last night.

If the phrases don't work for you, then try to imagine the person in a happy situation. Alternatively, the breath may carry an embodied sense of goodwill—almost as if you're blowing up a balloon of goodwill with each breath. This is completely valid as a mettā practice.

All the hindrances we experience in vipassanā can emerge in mettā: wandering mind, dullness, doubt. In the first instance, we just acknowledge these and bring our attention back to generating mettā. Remember what we said yesterday about dodging round the hindrances. Some of these dodges we've already learnt in vipassanā: opening our eyes or standing up for dullness and lethargy; calming ourselves for a few breaths

for the wandering mind, restlessness, and worry. If the hindrance persists, we switch attention back to the easiest of the mettā categories and re-establish goodwill before re-connecting with the more challenging category. Basically, do whatever you can to make things easy for yourself.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is when all our grudges reappear the moment we think of a person—even our best friend—or else we start worrying what they think of us. This is quite natural. It's part of the purification process. Keep reminding yourself that there doesn't have to be a feeling of loving-kindness. It's the willingness to keep trying that counts.

If you keep getting carried away into angry or anxious thoughts, direct mettā towards yourself in the shade of compassion. For example: "May I be free from ill will," or "May I be free from anxiety." Stay with this for the full session if needed.

What is more troublesome is when the near enemy goes unnoticed. We're wishing everyone well, heart soaring with goodwill, but subtly identifying with that sense of goodness and friendliness. We might only notice the problem afterwards. We're beaming radiantly at our family over breakfast, but when someone makes a snappy response, our bubble bursts. The fall from grace can be very sore and bring out the worst in us. Suddenly we hate everyone.

If you notice this pattern, try taking it easier during mettā practice. Allow a few breaths between each good wish and be sensitive to feelings of friendliness. Acknowledge and appreciate them. Then they can energize and strengthen your mettā without leading you into delusion. It helps to keep in mind that we're not practicing mettā in order to feel good. Feelings come and go. What matters is that we're willing to gently nudge our attitude towards goodwill in all circumstances.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we can judge our goodwill to be so paltry that we believe we're not really practicing at all. This is self-doubt, doubting our own powers of goodness. It underlies the fear of failure we spoke of last night. In the first instance, just carry on regardless of any belittling comments you hear. Perhaps you can smile at them or insist, "This is enough. I will not despise my goodwill offering." Try putting a hand on your heart or any gesture you find supportive.

If that doesn't work, try self-compassion, reassuring yourself over and over of your essential goodness—just as the ideal mother would reassure her only child. Alternatively, shade the goodwill towards equanimity, encouraging yourself to take it easy and don't believe self-doubt's belittling judgments. Instead, see this meditation session as a deep purification.

If none of the suggested remedies for the near or far enemies is working, then switch to vipassanā, acknowledging whatever emotion is coming up. And don't think of any such session as a failure. It's a very central and necessary part of mettā practice to know when to call a halt and switch to vipassanā. A successful explorer will often say that their most precious quality wasn't determination or strength, but the ability to turn back when things were too dangerous.

Mettā practice is a deep exploration of the heart. It shows us how threatened we feel deep down, due to our confusion about ultimate reality.

When our mettā can no longer dodge and dive around the demons we've unleashed, we need to respect their power and listen to their story in vipassanā.

In daily life, we cultivate mettā in acts of friendship—making someone a cup of tea, taking time to visit. Or we could join a local club, donate towards a community project. In all cases, we need to keep reminding ourselves that our actions are for our own and others' welfare. Otherwise, we can easily slip into attachment: being friendly so that we'll feel good, or so that people will like us, and then getting a shock when our expectations aren't met. That shock can lead on to resentment and other manifestations of ill will. Altruism is quite a tough practice.

I remember my first clear seeing of this. I was on retreat and noticed a hammer had been left in the garden—probably someone forgot it after doing some work. I picked it up and brought it back to the tool shed. I noticed how strongly I wanted to leave a note explaining where I'd found it and what I'd assumed. But I also felt the neediness underlying this. Basically, I wanted them to know how caring and kind I was. It seemed like such a waste just to leave the hammer back without getting any recognition for my good deed. But luckily, I had the sense not to encourage my neediness, and I sadly left it back with no note and no mark of recognition.

After that, it was easier to spot the bonds of attachment in almost every so-called good deed. Just seeing was the really important thing. Then I had a choice. I could cut out whatever aspects of my good deed were really about getting praise and recognition. I could acknowledge the sense of loss in all this, and I could make the good wish—even though this was usually with a tight grimace.

This is an example of how mettā brings up the near and far enemies. If we find ourselves anxiously anticipating our friend's next words, we need to acknowledge that this is attachment and step back to regain our equilibrium. Perhaps we just go quiet for

a while, directing mettā towards ourselves. Or we might need to remove ourselves physically to avoid the temptation to seek reassurance or otherwise burden them with our needs.

Caring for ourselves builds up the confidence needed to overcome emotional dependency. We do this in a very deep way when we devote time to meditation. But every activity—washing, dressing, eating, working—is part of caring for our human life. We need to remind ourselves that our motivation is kindness. Otherwise, these easily slip into autopilot and emotional self-neglect. "May I take care of myself happily" is a good phrase to remember as we go about our daily activities.

This can bring up another shade of the far enemy. For myself, the practice around eating has shown up a lot of guilt. If I find myself looking in the cupboard for a snack, I prefer to do this without any reflection rather than say, "May I take care of myself happily." The reflection brings up all kinds of questions like: Do I really need this? Should I be having this? Isn't this self-indulgence?

At first, the only way I could deal with the situation was to close the cupboard door and go without that little perk. And I'd feel pretty bad for having even tried to take a snack. But then half an hour later, I'd be munching my way through the biscuits anyhow. The desire would have slipped through and got me to the cupboard.

After a bit of reflection, I started experimenting with mindful indulgence as a way of working more skilfully with the desire and guilt cycle. I needed to plan a few treats which were obviously not just for the sake of nourishing the body—like cheesecake and ice cream. I would eat slowly, pausing whenever the guilt surfaced, letting it ebb away into a good wish for my own happiness. And when the treat was over and the guilt would be persuading me to be very judgmental about my unnecessary indulgence, I would instead thank myself for having given myself this little perk to cheer myself up.

Gradually, this has undermined the automatic guilt which surfaces around pleasure. I can more willingly resist unnecessary treats and feel grateful that my better judgment overcame the habit of desire. And I can more easily admit that if I'm feeling a bit low, a biscuit—or maybe cheesecake and ice cream—will cheer me up.

So in daily life, we need to find skilful ways of working around the patterns of ill will that so easily manifest, rather than expect too much of ourselves in the mettā department.

In daily life, the attempt to practice mettā can also get twisted around to ill will when we identify with the feeling of mettā. We want so much to think of ourselves as kindly and benevolent. But when people who push our buttons show us that we're nothing of the sort, then we fly into a rage at the most petty remark. So now we have a new reason to hate them.

It's the old problem of identity. If we start bringing "me, a benevolent person" into the equation, we end up in trouble. We need to keep reminding ourselves that until we're fully enlightened, "me" will become all kinds of different characters depending on the situation. The rotten-hearted, fizzling-with-rage me is our reminder to cultivate self-care.

When our nearest and dearest have managed to push that button and we are on the verge of a blazing row, it's usually best to beat a hasty retreat before we say anything to worsen the situation. If we say something nasty—which of course seems perfectly justified in the heat of the moment—it ends up making things an awful lot harder for ourselves. The Buddha put right speech amongst the three steps on morality in the Eightfold Path.

This may be because most of us involved in spiritual development would think carefully before thumping someone or doing any physical deed that would harm them. But harmful speech comes out so easily when we feel threatened. It can slip out before we've had time to think. "The tongue like a sharp knife kills without drawing blood," as the ancient Chinese proverb tells us.

It helps to have a stock phrase in mind, something like, "I can't think clearly about this right now, I'll get back to you later." Then we go off somewhere quiet to let ourselves fizzle out. When we've calmed a bit, we often feel the sorrow underlying our bout of rage. Often this is linked to the truth of anattā, showing us how little control we have over others and even over our own emotions. Although the facts are, as you have heard a thousand times before, the feeling of not being able to control that which we care about always challenges us to the core.

Rather than give out to ourselves about our limitations, we need to learn to offer ourselves mettā in compassionate terms—perhaps some comforting gesture like stroking our hand and reassuring ourselves that it's all okay. Eventually we may be able to tune into the basic humanity of whoever it was that angered us and wish them to come to no harm.

Let's turn now to look at the Buddha's teachings on the value of spiritual friendship, or kalyāṇa mittatā in Pali. One teaching starts with Ānanda remarking, "This is half of the holy life, Lord—admirable friendship, admirable companionship." The Buddha replied, "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues, he can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

At first sight this seems a bit odd. The Buddha is more often heard advising people to withdraw to some secluded place to meditate. Now here he is telling Ānanda that friendship and companionship constitute the whole of the holy life. Sounds great, doesn't it? Maybe we can just hang about chatting while the Dhamma somehow filters in.

But the sutta doesn't end there, and in the next paragraph the Buddha is back to his more usual form: "And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment." Right view is the first part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and he says the same about all the other parts.

So we still have to do all the usual hard work. But the point being made here is that the work is done in the context of friendship. This emphasises the humanity in the Buddhist teaching. Too often we hear words like seclusion and dispassion and think of the path as a solitary, antisocial, lonely affair. But here the Buddha is placing human friendship as the essential frame for all our work.

He describes the friendship we need for spiritual life as admirable and gives this definition: "And what is meant by admirable friendship? There is the case where a lay person, in whatever town or village he may dwell, spends time with householders or householders' sons, young or old, who are advanced in virtue. He talks with them, engages them in discussions." The language gets complex from here on, but the gist of it is that the person emulates the best in each of them—copying the generosity of the generous friend, the wisdom of the wise friend, and so on.

Basically, we are to seek out virtuous friends, find the best in them, and copy that. If we are lucky enough to have a Dhamma group, we already have a source of admirable friendship. This is such a wonderful gift. I found a meditation group in the mid-1980s, and over the past thirty years they have become my best friends. When we chat about

our various challenges and inspirations in life, we end up framing this in the context of the Dhamma. So quite naturally our attitudes, speech and lifestyle have become better aligned with the Dhamma just by spending time in each other's company.

Now let's look at his specific advice to seek out the best in each of our friends and copy that. At one level this happens naturally. In any group you get norms for behaviour. So if getting drunk every night is a badge of honour in your friendship group, then you'll probably feel odd, even a bit ashamed, if you're not a drinker. The Buddha counsels against making unwise friendships like these, saying they are a drain on our resources.

But amongst our wise friends, generosity, caring for others, going on retreat or daily meditation practice might be badges of honour. So our own behaviour naturally tends to move up towards the group norm. Our goodness rubs off on one another at a subconscious level.

Can we also bring that to the level of conscious choice? Can we actively seek out what's most admirable in our friends and copy that? Certainly we can, though we might often run into obstacles on the way. Ireland, for example, has been described as a nation of begrudgers. We seek for the downside in every success story, the cloud behind the silver lining. To the extent that a begrudging cultural norm rubs its way down to each of us, we find it hard to trust and value goodness in our friends and even in ourselves. So the Buddha's advice offers valuable balance to any cultural tendency to suspect the worst in everyone.

To take an example, I have some wonderful friends who have a greater capacity than me to smile at human weakness, to not get too hung up about it. My own tendency is to get depressed when I hear someone's making a mess of things.

And when I see my friends smiling, I can find myself wondering, do they have no sympathy? We've talked about this at various stages, and I completely trust that their smile is based not on a lack of sympathy but on having a wider perspective on the situation. To put it in Dharma terms, you could say that they see the first noble truth in action—that life involves suffering—but trust that the other three will eventually save the day.

The effort I've had to put into understanding and trusting their perspective illustrates how hard it is for us to value virtues that we haven't developed strongly in ourselves. Much easier to ignore these, or even quietly dismiss them as a vice rather than a virtue—for example, my tendency to interpret their smiles as lack of sympathy.

Recognising a virtue that we haven't developed strongly ourselves is hard enough, but copying it is even harder. My laryngectomy operation was a case in point. My friends were better able than me to see things in perspective—a huge loss, yes, but not a major disaster. This allowed them to care for me very effectively and incredibly generously throughout the whole episode.

At times, though, my sense of the situation was that all the goodness had gone out of life. I just couldn't understand how they could be happy. It felt like treachery. In meditation, as I tried to bring their smiles into consciousness, a knot of tension would gather and I would recoil in agony. All my aversion was projected outwards onto them, seeing them as uncaring and even cruel.

But with the practice of dropping the thoughts and noting each emotion, I would eventually unwind into compassion for my sorry state. In the kindly gaze of compassion, I could admit that the basis of all this turmoil was nothing to do with my friends at all. Instead, it was aversion to having lost my voice. With that admission, I could begin to see the value of moving on, accepting this new situation, working with it as best I could. At that stage, their smiles were seen as friendly and encouraging, and in my mind's eye I could stretch out my hand gingerly towards them, let them lead me into my new life.

So the Buddha's advice—find the best in your friends and try to copy it—is extremely valuable but very challenging. It brings up vanity, the way we cling haughtily to "I'm better than you" as our inner begrudger dismisses their virtue. Or we collapse into the despair of "I'm worse than you" and curl up into a ball of jealousy. Or we cling tight to the pleasant notion of "we're just the same" as our imagination pulls them into our gang—people we can understand and feel easy with.

All of these, the Buddha says, are forms of vanity, clinging to the notion "I am." But this clinging doesn't do us any justice. We're trying to define who we are, fit ourselves into a box, when in fact we're continually evolving and changing. We're on our journey to the end of suffering. It doesn't matter whether our friends are more or less developed, only that they're willing to help us along our path and we're willing to accept their help—and vice versa, that we're willing to help them.

Any practical help must start with goodwill. Otherwise we'll end up trying to impose our supposed wisdom on them. So we bring them into our hearts in mettā practice—the basis for spiritual friendship.

I want to close with the final part of the Buddha's conversation with Ānanda:

And through this line of reasoning, one may know how admirable friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life. It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to ageing have gained release from ageing.

He goes on to say the same about death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair, before concluding:

It is through this line of reasoning that one may know how having admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.

Here the Buddha is inviting us to reflect on his life and the many people who have benefited from his teaching, and thus to develop gratitude and admiration for him. This sits a bit uneasily with his teaching of not-self. If nothing in his phenomenal being had any permanent substantial essence, what is it we are admiring and being grateful for?

Although we can't identify a permanent essence with anything tangible about the Buddha, we can acknowledge that his dedication to finding an escape from dukkha and teaching others what he discovered had an enormous impact on the world. As a result, here we are on our own path to enlightenment. We can admire and be grateful for his dedication, energy, patience, compassion, and all the other qualities that fuelled his spiritual life. Chief among these are his wisdom and awareness, satipañña. Using these faculties he discovered that which is unborn, undying, the end of all suffering.

And while we can't paint a mental picture of whatever in him enjoys the perfect peace of Nibbāna, we can each in our own way attempt to take that mystery to heart. For myself, this would mean allowing myself to wonder: what is it in him that is unborn, undying, the end of suffering? Of course, I have no answers. Sometimes my mind conjures up a bright light and I feel myself basking in its warmth. Often the initial pleasure turns to some form of dukkha, perhaps grief that I can't grasp onto that light, hold it forever in my heart. But the grief is sensed as healing, teaching me to let go of attachment to any image or notion of what enlightenment might be. Recognising this, gratitude comes up, and a deeper commitment to this contemplation.

Now, of course, our begrudging attitudes show up here too.

Who does he think he is asking everyone to adore him? Does he think he's God Almighty? But we know the drill. Know thoughts as thoughts. Feel the feelings. Trust things to evolve in the light of awareness.

As I take on this practice, what happens is that I feel myself developing a personal relationship with the Buddha. My imagination can be drawn towards the details of his life—remembering his shock when he realised the futility of his princely life, seeing him say his last goodbye to his wife and son, creeping out of the palace to take up the life of a wandering ascetic. Later on, after years of hardship, accepting the rice milk from Sujata. That's a very inspiring image for me. I see it as the moment he recognised that his humanity and bodily needs form part of his spiritual path.

Another very touching moment for me is during his last temptation before enlightenment, when Mara, his inner begrudger, sneers, "What makes you think you could be enlightened? What have you done to merit that? Who do you think you are?" This is the hindrance of self-doubt, a challenge for every human being. In all the other temptations, he was able to sit still and not be swayed. But here his resolution is shaking. He feels the need of support. He stretches his hand down to touch the earth, calling it as witness to his right to come to the end of suffering.

As I contemplate these and other stories from the life of the Buddha, he becomes a more tangible presence in my life. Imagining his serenity under the rose apple tree, I feel serene. Imagining his courage in leaving home, I feel myself grow in courage. Seeing him reach down to the earth in his moment of self-doubt, I feel myself as part of the earth reassuring him, encouraging him to press on.

This growing sense of friendship, companionship, camaraderie makes it a bit easier to contemplate his enlightened state. The touch of friendship extends beyond my understanding, encouraging me to make peace with the mystery of the unborn, undying, the end of suffering. There is a growing trust that whatever it is or isn't, there is nothing to fear.

This is the practice of devotion. Those of us brought up in Christianity will be familiar with the approach. Contemplating the life of Jesus as we say the Rosary, for example—devotion is a way of opening the heart. It's a form of mettā practice, where we make the Buddha the object of our mettā. One teacher calls it falling in love with the Buddha.

Now, of course, falling in love is not plain sailing. It can evoke great inner turmoil. We can fall in and out of love at a great rate. Wandering mind, dullness, restlessness, aversion—all the hindrances come up as we bring the Buddha to mind. At times we'll be able to simply note these and then come back to the main focus, the Buddha. At times we have to give our full attention to whatever hindrance is uppermost, trusting that it will eventually burn itself out in the light of awareness. So we can switch

between devotion and mindfulness as appropriate. It's like any relationship. At times we can be completely focused on the other. At times we need to withdraw and tend to ourselves, maybe to lick our wounds.

This retreat is an ideal opportunity to follow the Buddha's teaching on kalyāṇa mittatā, spiritual friendship. If it weren't for the people around us, we wouldn't be spending so many hours a day in meditation. So everyone here is our spiritual friend. We could devote a portion of our meditation practice to bringing each other into our hearts, being grateful for our connection within the group. Let's vow to look for the best in one another and copy that.

And for those of you who like falling in love, then give in to the temptation. Fall in love with the Buddha. Or you might prefer a somewhat more Buddhist phrase: become the Buddha within.

CHAPTER 21

Divine Abiding, c. Compassion - read by Biddy O'Connell

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

> *This dharma talk offers a profound exploration of karuṇā (compassion) as one of the four brahmavihārās (divine abidings), examining how mettā naturally transforms when we encounter suffering. Noirín Sheahan describes compassion as "the trembling of the enlightened heart in response to the suffering of the world" - a response that maintains deep peace even while the heart breaks. Drawing from the Vinaya, she recounts moving stories of the Buddha personally caring for monks abandoned due to illness, demonstrating how an awakened being responds to suffering without anxiety or aversion.*
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> *The talk carefully distinguishes true compassion from its near enemies - pity, grief, and overwhelm - which masquerade as caring but contain hidden aversion. Using the memorable example of caring for a sick goldfish, Sheahan illustrates how pity creates separation and superiority, while genuine compassion unites us with the suffering being. She also addresses compassion's far enemy, cruelty, noting how it can manifest subtly in sarcasm, self-criticism, or institutional neglect. The teaching draws on C.S. Lewis's "A Grief Observed" and includes a personal account of discovering that perceived pain in others was actually unpleasant sensation in her own body.*
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> *Practical guidance is offered for formal compassion meditation using phrases like "may you be free from suffering," while working skillfully with the hindrances that arise. The talk emphasizes that glimpsing our own capacity for cruelty during practice is part of purification, not cause for self-judgment. Sheahan shares her own experience of working with anger and cruelty when her privacy was invaded, showing how forgiveness transforms these energies. The teaching concludes with suggestions for practicing compassion in daily life through any effort to alleviate suffering.*

Tonight I want to look at the way metta shades in tone when we come across difficulties. Metta itself remains intact. Our basis is wishing ourselves and others well. But the goodwill is expressed in compassionate terms with sensitivity to the particular situation.

Compassion is sometimes described as the trembling of the enlightened heart in response to the suffering of the world. There is deep sympathy with the suffering being and the wish that their suffering may come to an end. But there is no anxiety about the situation. This can be very difficult for us to understand. The enlightened being is in

touch with a level of peace that is untouched by the suffering and can sustain a calm tenderness even when the heart is breaking or the body is being torn apart. Within the context of peace and tenderness, anything can be borne.

This is what Julian of Norwich learned when, in revulsion at the sufferings of the world, she heard the words: "All shall be well. All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

Compassion is the manifestation of wisdom in the face of suffering. It allows the suffering to elicit a response of tenderness and care without any hint of anxiety or aversion. Sustained by compassion, the enlightened person does not get in any way flustered by the situation and can respond appropriately—for example, caring for an injured being or finding words to comfort.

The Vinaya, the book of monastic discipline, includes a story of the Buddha and Ananda coming across a monk who had acute dysentery and was lying in his soiled robes. You can imagine the sight and the stench. The Buddha and Ananda cleaned the monk and his robes. Afterwards, the Buddha addressed the sick monk's fellows, clarifying that it was their duty to look after one another in case of illness. "Monks," he said, "if you don't tend to one another, who then will tend to you? Whoever would tend to me should tend to the sick."

Another part of the scriptures describes the Buddha finding a monk who had been abandoned by his fellows because of the sores oozing all over his body. His robes were sticking to him, and again just imagine the stench and the sight of this man as he lay there abandoned and dying in agony. The Buddha boiled water and washed the monk with his own hands to clean off the pus. He similarly washed the soiled robes and attended the monk until these were dry. Once the monk had been comforted, the Buddha talked to him of the Dharma, and as you can expect, the monk became fully liberated.

In both of these stories, the Buddha modelled a steadiness of heart that allowed compassion to flow where most people would retreat in alarm and disgust.

At other times, compassionate action could take the form of warding off an aggressor. Sharon Salzberg tells the story of being attacked while in a rickshaw in India. She was badly frightened when she told her teacher Munindra-ji about the incident. He replied, "Oh Sharon, with all the goodwill in your heart, you should have taken your umbrella and whacked that man with it."

Compassion does not mean passivity. We can oppose injustice vigorously so as to prevent suffering.

At other times there may be no appropriate action, no way to prevent or minimise the suffering. In those cases, just to stay nearby and witness the suffering is our only option and is a very precious gift. Simply staying with a suffering person, refusing to abandon them though we can offer no practical help, gives them the best possible opportunity to let their suffering open the door to wisdom. If we can take to heart the first noble truth—that there is suffering—this opens the door to the other truths which liberate us from suffering.

Whether we are caring for a sick person, vigorously opposing injustice, or witnessing some suffering we cannot prevent, we need to be able to resist the reactivity which comes up in the face of suffering. Such non-reactivity is learned every time we sit with difficulties during vipassana: even a slight pain in the knee, the noise of machinery, someone fidgeting nearby, a worrisome thought. All these are forms of suffering. As we learn to bear with these types of disturbance in meditation and their myriad spin-off thoughts and anxieties, we are cultivating the skills we need to respond compassionately in the face of deeper suffering in our own lives and in others.

True compassion has this non-reactivity as its basis. Even though we may be speeding around in an effort to cope with the reality, a compassionate hurry is motivated by care rather than alarm and is completely at ease with the situation.

Barriers to compassion, as with all forms of dukkha, come back to reacting to our feelings. In the case of suffering, there will be an unpleasant feeling at the core and the automatic urge to get rid of this. In many real life situations, we won't have the level of calm concentration needed to recognize this very simple level of our being. We will be spinning such a complex story around the unpleasant feeling that we get hooked by the myriad emotions that the story generates.

The stories we tell ourselves at times of distress emanate from the perceptions of self—the notion that there is a substantial entity lodged somewhere in our body and mind. This self is, or should be, in control of matters.

Imagine you have a pet goldfish who swims quietly around in a tank in your living room. Today when you sprinkle some food into the tank, Goldie doesn't dart around after these nibbles as he usually does. He stays put at the bottom of the tank. Taking a closer look at him, you notice he's lost some of his lustrous colour and there are some whitish spots in amongst his scales. By this stage there will be unpleasant feelings stirring, causing your face to frown and perhaps stiffening much of your body in tension. What happens next will depend on your habitual tendencies in the face of a perceived threat. Let's say you're a leap-into-action type. A sense of yourself as powerful and resourceful will be established.

A determination to save Goldie from peril. Although you have hardly given Goldie a thought for months beyond tossing a few grains of food into the tank from time to time, he's fast becoming your nearest and dearest, and a sense of enmity is forming around those whitish spots on his scales. Your eyes narrow as you examine them. Aha! Fungus! Dear Goldie, attacked by rotten spores of horrid fungus. Outrage and indignation—it's you and Goldie versus the microscopic world. "Don't worry, Goldie," you whisper into the fishbowl before making a dash to the computer to search for solutions to goldfish spots.

You pace about in consternation as it goes through its infuriating start-up routine. "Everything's going to be fine," you call, banging the keys furiously to get "white spots goldfish" into the Google search line. "Mummy's looking after everything."

What's happening is that compassion has got entangled with one of its near enemies: pity. Pity lets us feel superior to the suffering person. Goldie has been reduced to a pathetic entity that you must rescue and restore to health. There's a clear separation between me, the valiant saviour, and Goldie, the poor creature who needs me. In pity, we can also be suppressing our fears that exactly the same kind of suffering could be visited on us. Thus we can quietly despise a drug addict while outwardly sympathising with their plight. The experience of compassion, on the other hand, unites us with the suffering person. Our own heart trembles in resonance with their plight.

Pity so easily masquerades as compassion. It doesn't help that pity is listed as a virtue in many Christian texts—but in the context of the Christian virtue, the word pity is being used to mean compassion. The difference between the two is that pity includes aversion. We have generated a sense of enmity around the unwelcome sight of those white spots, which in turn evokes a sense of self to combat this enemy. In our rush to rescue, everything that gets in our way is seen as the enemy: computer delays, an incoming phone call, the rest of our agenda for the day, the cat crying for her saucer of milk. These are all irritating demands on our time which is urgently needed for poor little Goldie. And when our trawl through the websites convinces us that most fungal problems result from unclean water, we ourselves become the enemy. We berate ourselves angrily, trying to remember the last time we changed the water. Later, as we scrub and scour the tank, Goldie, in his replacement bowl, can also become the enemy. That good-for-nothing fish putting me to all this trouble!

While compassion has goodwill as its basis, pity adds a big dollop of aversion to the mix. It's very easy for compassion to slide stealthily into pity when we are caring for someone who is ill. With compassion we can see the sick person's strengths as well as their illness. We respect them fully and value their friendship despite their reduced

state. When compassion slides into pity, we sense ourselves as strong and resourceful, the other as needy and weak, depending on us. Whenever there's a very clear dividing line between yourself and the person you're caring for, it's likely that pity is emerging.

Like attachment, pity is a normal aspect of human relationships. It gives us energy and motivation to look after vulnerable people. But it's destructive in the long term. In subtle ways, we might even be preventing the other person from recovering. We fuss over them, trying to anticipate their every need. We sympathise profoundly with every complaint. We counsel against taking any risks—never mind what the doctor says, doctors don't understand. All of this excessive caring drains our energy. In our low moments we resent the sick person and we see ourselves as the victim of their neediness. The aversion has now found a different outlet. Instead of the sickness being the enemy, the sick person has turned into the enemy.

To complicate matters, the sick person often reacts against the aversion underlying our pity. They resent being reduced to the role we are creating for them: the needy person. In their low moments they hate us for so clearly showing them their dependent status. Pity breeds resentment in both parties.

When we see ourselves as the injured party, self-pity is a common reaction. Suppose we valiantly scrub out Goldie's tank and replace it with sparkling clean water. We do this daily for a week, but still Goldie isn't recovering. The spots are getting bigger and the food is still untouched. What started out as aversion to the spots now grows to encompass aversion to all the work I'm doing for no reward. It's all so unfair. It's not just Goldie who is injured.

We've joined him and feel ourselves the injured party. The only comfort is to sympathise with ourselves. We run through the story from our point of view, insisting again and again that we're doing absolutely everything right, and how unfair and awful it is that no good is coming from our hard work. Sympathy feels pleasant and we cling to it, unwittingly prolonging and deepening the injured party role, nursing a victim mentality. We start telling all our friends about our plight, eliciting their sympathy. Goldie, who for months went quite unnoticed, becomes the centre of our lives.

Instead of being the spring-into-action type, let's suppose your habit when faced with suffering is to crumple in grief. So when Goldie refuses his food, you stare at him in dismay. When you notice the white spots, your worst fears are confirmed. He's a goner. Your head hangs in misery until someone or something helps you snap out of it, leaving Goldie to his fate.

While pity can spur us into action, grief takes the suffering so deeply inward that it paralyzes us. We mistake grief for compassion because we want the suffering to stop, but we overlook the role aversion is playing—distorting our perceptions, overstating the problem.

I remember one time when I was sitting on a park bench watching a group of pigeons pecking at some food on the ground. I noticed that one of the pigeons had lost his toes on one foot. That leg ended in a bulbous stump, and rather than walking, he was hopping from place to place on the other foot. *Oh no*, I thought, *how awful*. Inwardly I was writhing; my face was wincing. I would have sworn that I was feeling the pigeon's pain.

I had noticed this before—the belief that I could feel the pain of other beings when I saw their physical wounds. But I had never questioned this belief, as my attention was always so fixed on thinking about the awfulness of their situation. However, this time I registered the belief and started to wonder about it. How could I possibly be feeling the pigeon's pain? It didn't make any sense. I don't have any special powers of that nature.

I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths, and vowed to let mindfulness sort it out. It took a while, and I went through a lot of fear and confusion. But after a time, it was as if a veil lifted and I realised the pain was in my own body. It was simply an unpleasant tingling at the base of my spine. Once I could locate the pain, it became quite bearable. My mind stopped amplifying it and projecting it onto the pigeon. After a few moments, I hardly even noticed it.

I opened my eyes again, and this time when I looked at the pigeon, I noticed how well he was coping with his lameness—how he was managing to hold his own and get at some food. I saw that he was actually quite plump and healthy looking. Within this more hopeful scenario, my spirits lifted, and with this came a simple wish that he come to no harm on account of his injury. Instead of feeling awful about him, I felt respect for his plucky attitude and gratitude that he had taught me a worthwhile lesson. Since then, I've never been quite so overcome when seeing a person or animal with a physical injury.

When we are grief-stricken in the face of suffering, aversion is colouring the whole scene. We can only think in negative terms—about the suffering person, about ourselves, about the future. We've taken one instance of suffering and magnified it out of all proportion, just as I was doing in the case of the pigeon. This paralyses us. We've become so bound up in suffering that we have no resources left to add anything posit-

ive to the situation, not even a good wish. A child stands by in mute misery as their sibling is punished by an enraged parent. We look away from our bereaved neighbour, feeling anguish on their behalf but not knowing what to say.

When grief gets overwhelming, we can go into a state of shock and even denial. A friend told me of her meeting with her cardiologist. When he told her she would need open-heart surgery, she looked around to see who he was talking to, because she knew it couldn't possibly be her.

C.S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed* gives a very honest and poignant account of the moment-to-moment experience of grief. The book was written from a journal he kept during the first weeks and months after the death of his wife. It opens with the statement: "Nobody told me grief was so like fear." His perceptive inquiry showed him the fear underlying all the thoughts and emotions resulting from her loss. He needed company but dreaded when the spotlight was turned on him. "Why can't they just talk to one another but not to me?" His book gives many insights into the development of compassion and equanimity through his scrupulous and honest tracking through the suffering of bereavement.

To develop compassion, we need to learn to feel our fear without buying into the thoughts and perceptions it suggests to the mind. It can motivate us to sit through knee aches and itchy noses when we remember this.

As we learn to disentangle the knots of confusion that emerge in reaction to these small discomforts, we are freeing our capacity for compassion in response to the inevitable sorrows of life.

Grief, pity, and overwhelm are examples of the near enemies of compassion. We sympathise with the suffering person and wish to relieve their suffering, but the very thought of suffering gives rise to these reactions. At the opposite extreme of reactivity we have cruelty, which is the direct opposite or far enemy of compassion.

Cruelty shows up in circumstances where we feel threatened and need to defend ourselves. Anger arises and energises us to overcome our enemy. But then the anger sticks around even in victory, compelling us to twist the knife. Cruelty prolongs the other's suffering and enjoys the power that enables us to do this.

Cruelty can take the form of bullying, where the more vulnerable person is physically or emotionally abused by the bully. We regularly read of abuse of animals, children, the elderly, and those with mental and physical handicap. A recent academic review reported that if a physician was seeing twenty elderly patients a day, then at least one of these was likely to have been abused in the previous year. A recent probe into

abuse of mentally handicapped adults in a care home in Ireland showed patients being treated with quite casual cruelty—refusing their requests to be taken to the toilet, being made to sit in their own urine, being slapped when they made a disturbance. And a few years ago, the UK Secretary commented that cruelty had become the norm in some health and social care institutions.

Much cruelty is not from willful glee in the suffering of others but because we neglect to examine what is happening. As a society we tolerate widespread abuse of animals in factory farming and when they are transported on long journeys for slaughter. Even as vegetarians, how often do we think of the suffering of cow and calf separated from each other so that we can enjoy our dairy milk and cheese? If fish could cry out, would we still be fishing as a peaceful recreation?

As against so many instances of cruelty in our society, there are also outstanding individuals and institutions that oppose cruelty and treat the vulnerable with care and respect. Many voluntary organisations look after animal welfare. There are hospitals and care homes which don't hit the headlines but do quiet, often heroic work to care for the sick and the handicapped. Web-based pressure groups get millions of signatories daily in an effort to prevent injustice. All such efforts bear witness to the innate human quality of compassion, the antidote to cruelty.

Hopefully none of us seriously committed to the Dharma will be involved in overt brutality. But cruelty can show itself in subtle ways. Does a sarcastic remark slip out now and again? Do we indulge daydreams where the boss gets his just desserts? When someone we dislike is losing an argument, are we secretly gloating, cheering on the opponent? When caring for a vulnerable person, is our tone of voice at times chosen to show how idiotic we think they are? Or do we take it out on ourselves, chiding ourselves savagely when things go wrong?

Because most of us are conditioned to view cruelty as aberrant, it's very hard for us to admit to cruelty. It helps to remember the Buddha's assertion that the basic problem is ignorance—not understanding the nature of suffering and how to bring it to an end. Because of this, we make all kinds of mistakes in trying to shield ourselves from pain. One of these mistakes is cruelty.

After the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989, the media probed into conditions in many Romanian orphanages. I remember one image in particular: a little boy of about two, hitting his head repeatedly against the bars of his cot. His face was cut and bruised, and someone was trying to restrain him, but the moment they let go of his head, he would bang it forcefully against the bars again.

I think he gave us a graphic image for the innocent mistake at the basis of cruelty. As I see it, he senses the world as awful and naturally tries to find a way out. Because he can't change anything else in his environment, he turns on himself. Banging his head against the bars gives him a sense of control. The sense of control is gratifying, probably his only source of pleasure, so he keeps it up. This is self-inflicted cruelty. But the child is not inherently cruel. He just can't find any other way of asserting himself.

Similarly, our moments of cruelty do not make us a cruel person. For that moment we take the only pleasure we can envisage in the situation—delight in prolonging suffering. When conditions change, we can be kind and caring.

Because we tend to judge cruelty as aberrant, we find ways of denying or justifying our subtle cruelties. The phrase "there is no other way to deal with them" can quickly dismiss the person and cover over our harshness. That kind of blanket justification is what allows institutional abuse to flourish. A culture of brutality can grow around such simple slogans. Such thoughts harden our hearts against whoever we are dealing with. In the stress of the situation, we are denying their humanness and vulnerability, their need for understanding and love.

When we are being cruel, we delight in the misery of the suffering person or animal. By contrast, pity and grief lock us into some identity with the suffering state. The challenge is to find a balance—to open our hearts to suffering without taking on the role of perpetrator, heroic saviour, or victim.

At times, compassion flows naturally. But then the suffering touches a deep core within, and we sense ourselves taking one of the reactionary roles. We're suddenly flooded with aversion or overcome with anxiety, and can't find any way back to the easy flow of compassionate goodwill.

We need to be patient with our repeated encounters with the near and far enemies, finding ways of working alongside these tendencies rather than expecting them to disappear.

To cultivate compassion, the classic phrase is "May you be free from suffering," but vary this if it helps. For example: "May you have a peaceful death." "May you not despair." "May you not be troubled by little things." Use images if these work better than words. Some people like to visualize a healing light flowing into a person. Others prefer to imagine the healing as emanating from their own breath. Remember, it doesn't matter if you don't feel anything. What matters is the wish that suffering will stop.

In formal meditation, it's best to start with someone you know is having a hard time and then move through all the various categories of people, not forgetting yourself, ending by radiating in all directions. It helps to take a few breaths so as to relax between each good wish.

Directing compassion at the difficult person is often a challenge. Don't be surprised if the far enemy emerges and you find yourself thinking, "Well, they deserve it," gloating gleefully at their plight. This is part of the purification process. Even if we don't behave in overtly cruel ways, the practice of compassion can reveal our deep fears—places where cruel retaliation seems like our only defence. Glimpsing our underlying savagery can be quite dismaying.

One teacher told me that the deeper we go in meditation, the more clearly we see that we have the seeds of all things within us: the child molester, the schoolyard bully, the rapist, the murderer. Our job is to recognise these urges, see them in the calm light of wisdom, and decide not to follow them because they lead to suffering. Our usual reaction of self-judgment is a second arrow which deepens the suffering rather than relieves it. The more practice we get at letting go of the second arrow, the easier it becomes to feel the enticement towards cruelty and contemplate this calmly.

Where do these urges come from? In my own experience, I sense cruelty as a refusal to forgive. Deliberately shutting my heart to myself or others gives me a self-righteous glow. But if I look carefully at that glow, there is a shadow side—the sneer of the tyrant.

To give an example: I ordain when I come here to Satipanya, but return to ordinary clothes when I am at home in Dublin. I also wear a wig to cover up my bald head. I haven't told many people in the family, as many of the older generation were brought up in a strict form of Catholicism, and I reckon they wouldn't be cheered by the thought of having a Buddhist nun—even just a part-time one—in the family.

As you can guess, the inevitable happened. My aunt came to visit for a few days. I was in my room getting ready for bed. I had taken off the electrolarynx and the wig when I heard her knocking at my door. I couldn't tell her "wait a moment" because the electrolarynx was at the other side of the room. I had just managed to grab the wig when I saw the door open and her head appearing around to ask whether she could take a sandwich. For a second she gaped at me in horror while I glared at her in fury. I was infuriated at the invasion of privacy, my bald head suddenly exposed, and my own powerlessness to say anything in protest. I barely managed a curt nod to indicate she could take all the blasted sandwiches she wanted so long as she got out of my room fast.

Although I was very angry, mindfulness allowed me to watch the process play itself out. After a while I was able to giggle at the humour of the situation and see that she had meant no harm. When I could manage to forgive, I felt the welcome relief of friendliness and the wish to meet with her and explain everything.

But then a deeper tangle showed itself: how to explain my attraction to ordaining as a Buddhist nun within what I anticipated as her abhorrence at the idea? In an instant, friendliness was replaced with an image of myself fully wigged up, haughtily asking her not to enter my room until I answered the door. It would have been so easy to ignore the note of cruelty in this, painting it over with a thought like, "That's what she deserves for being so rude." But because I could sense the glow of power as I clung to that haughty image, I recognised the underlying cruelty and had to admit this wasn't exactly in keeping with my aspirations as a Buddhist nun.

With that recognition, the journey towards forgiveness resumed. The following morning I was able to explain that I was now enrobing when I came to Satipanya. The conversation went through a few ups and downs, but ended with her telling me of a sorrow she bears regarding her own religious life. Thus we ended with a sense of mutual understanding and compassion.

One great advantage of being able to recognise and work skilfully with our own urges towards cruelty is that we can start to understand and forgive cruelty in others. We can practice compassion even for tyrants whose cruelty has caused horrendous suffering in the world. No longer so horrified by our own feelings of cruelty, we can imagine their world and the feelings that drove them. We can take them to heart and wish that they find forgiveness for their deeds.

Sometimes when we feel our own cruelty, the second arrow of self-judgment brings on anxiety. This is the flip side of cruelty: fear. Suppose a bully is taunting his victim. The glee comes from the thought, "This is happening to you, not to me." But bullies cannot maintain their superiority forever. Sooner or later—perhaps in sickness or old age—they have to admit their vulnerability. Knowing what can happen to vulnerable people, they are petrified. Think of how much reassurance you would have to give that person before they would dare to trust you.

That is the amount of reassurance we need to give ourselves when we catch a glimpse of our underlying urges towards cruelty and shrivel back in fear of ourselves. If we can keep reassuring our inner bully that they will only meet with kindness and forgiveness, then any urge towards cruelty can be transformed into the response of compassion.

Before finishing this section on working with cruelty, let me say a word about self-judgment. We have to be careful to note this impartially rather than reacting and thinking we shouldn't be so judgmental. When we can calm down and see things impartially, such judgment can even become an ally. Guy Armstrong, a renowned Vipassana teacher, tells how he found it impossible to forgive someone for their behavior until he saw the element of cruelty in his anger. His self-image revolted against the notion of himself as cruel, and this persuaded him to forgive the person. So in this case, his conditioning to censure cruelty served him well. Within the light of wisdom, all our emotional habits can be transformed so that they help us along the path.

At other times, when you bring a suffering person to mind, you might find yourself being pulled towards pity—getting lost in plans or worries about how you could help. Or you could find yourself overcome by grief. Recently, a meditator described how he would become saturated by a kind of horrified anxiety when practicing compassion for the refugees trying to find their way into Europe. Or your mind may simply go blank and refuse to engage—this is another example of grief, one that has led to overwhelm. These are all instances of the near enemy of compassion.

Try to simply acknowledge and continue, knowing that the emergence of enemies, near or far, just indicates that we are plowing new depths in our heart. We don't have to be discouraged by them or start judging ourselves because of them. Smile at them if possible and soldier on. We're not interested in how we feel, remember, but in the wish that suffering be alleviated. So we can put these feelings to one side and focus on the good wish. Similarly, for any of the hindrances, acknowledge and then re-engage with the compassion practice.

If self-judgment, pity, or any emotions become overwhelming, experiment with self-compassion. "May I be free from self-judgment. May I be free from pity. May I be free from grief." Or add in some mettā: "May I be happy and confident and free from self-judgment." And so on.

Radiating compassion is quite a challenging practice. In ordinary life, our hearts have so many clever tricks to stop us from acknowledging suffering. In compassion practice, we do the opposite—we ask ourselves to think about the suffering of our friends, our benefactors, and all other categories of people. We need to remind ourselves that in compassion, as for all Brahma Vihāra practice, we always try to make things as easy as possible for ourselves. Look for the route of least resistance in the heavenly direction, and be prepared to experiment.

For example, it often helps to switch back to mettā regularly and think of the person in happier circumstances. Or try putting a hand on your heart to steady yourself. I often prefer to work on compassion while walking rather than sitting, and when the going gets tough, it often helps to look around—not at people but at surfaces and furniture—and to touch surfaces as I pass them by. This practice, remember, deliberately brings suffering to mind, so it can bring up deep fear. Looking at surfaces and touching them helps reassure me of the basic goodness of the world. If the emotions become overpowering, I take a Vipassana break, acknowledging the emotion without any attempt to generate goodwill.

Finally, let's look for a moment at how we practice compassion in daily life. Any effort to alleviate suffering is also a practice of compassion—feeding the birds, looking after a sick friend, contributing to good causes, campaigning for human or animal rights, safeguarding the environment. If we have hurt someone, we could apologize and see if there's any way to make reparation. To practice self-compassion, we could make time for an activity we enjoy, like swimming, yoga, or music.

The near and far enemies will also surface in daily life. The attempt to engage with vulnerable people may show us how callously we feel towards them, how easily we get exasperated by their limitations. As in meditation, acknowledge and continue. Remember, the opening of the heart naturally brings up these defense mechanisms. The experience of callousness could indeed be welcomed as a sign we are moving beyond our comfort zone. At the other extreme, we might be fussing anxiously about them. Here we need to restrain ourselves, and if we feel overwhelmed by the situation, we need to extend compassion inwardly. This may mean simply wishing ourselves well, or we could reinforce the wish with a caring gesture.

May we find ways to comfort and encourage ourselves through every obstacle as we develop true compassion.

CHAPTER 22

Divine Abiding, d. Appreciative Joy, Muditā - read by Therese Caherty

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

> *This talk offers a comprehensive exploration of muditā (appreciative joy), the third of the four brahmavihāras or divine abidings. Noirin Sheahan explains how muditā fits within the broader framework of the brahmavihāras, showing how our basic mettā (goodwill) naturally adapts to different circumstances—becoming compassion when witnessing suffering, equanimity when facing what we cannot change, and appreciative joy when encountering the happiness of others.*
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> *The teaching draws on the Mahāmaṅgala Sutta to identify sources of genuine joy worthy of cultivation: wise companions, suitable dwelling places, family relationships, and meritorious actions. Sheahan emphasizes that the Buddha himself appreciated beauty, citing the Parinibbāna Sutta's account of the Buddha visiting shrines in his final days. The distinction between pīti (the joy arising from meditation and the pursuit of truth) and muditā (joy arising from appreciation of life's goodness) is carefully explained.*
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> *Particular attention is given to the near and far enemies of muditā. The far enemies—jealousy and denigration—close the heart to joy, while the near enemy of excessive excitement clings to it unskilfully. Practical guidance addresses how to work with self-denigration, offering the remedy of congratulating ourselves for good deeds and building healthy self-worth. The talk concludes with meditation instructions and strategies for cultivating muditā in daily life, especially during celebrations where the near and far enemies commonly arise.*

For the past few evenings, I've been talking about the Brahma Vihara, the beautiful states of mind and heart expressed when we're in harmony with the world.

The basis is metta or goodwill. We wish all beings to be happy, but metta doesn't make us smile with delight in all situations and circumstances. The intelligence we cultivate in Vipassana is also very much to the fore, and we're acutely aware of the ever-present potential for suffering and the need to take care that we don't unwittingly get the wheel turning. As we learn to acknowledge and bear with our emotions in Vipassana, we are better able to tune into the emotional tone of various situations that we find in our daily lives. Then we can tailor our goodwill towards compassion, mudita, or equanimity so as to fit in with different circumstances.

Suppose you're meeting a friend for coffee. You're feeling bright and breezy and giving silent good wishes to everyone in the restaurant. Then you see your friend coming and, to your surprise, you see them looking weary and glum. The simple metta wish, "may you be happy," just doesn't fit. It doesn't show any sensitivity to the situation. You might prefer if they'd feel bright and breezy to match your own mood, but that wish is out of kilter with their present reality. So you have to be prepared to let go of your bright and breezy mood and instead take into consideration that something may be amiss. As you let your mood change from brightness to concern, your goodwill can take on the hue of compassion. This more sombre form of goodwill fits when you're aware of witnessing some degree of suffering. The phrase, "may you be free from suffering," acknowledges both the suffering and your friend's potential to find freedom. Holding this good wish while you watch them approach means your tone of voice and body language will express empathy and care for whatever's troubling them.

To take another example, suppose you're walking down a street wishing strangers well as they pass by, but something catches your eye, and in a dark alley you see someone squatting on the pavement injecting drugs into a vein. Again, the straightforward metta wish, "may you be happy," just doesn't work here. It would be glossing over the reality, refusing to engage with the human tragedy you're witnessing. The wish "may you be free from suffering" fits better, as this is certainly a situation of suffering and it's possible that the person is suffering very deeply. But it doesn't acknowledge the kernel of the problem—that as far as we can judge, the person is making things worse for themselves by drug addiction. Equanimity is the Brahma Vihara which allows us to cope with what we don't want and judge as wrong. It accommodates both good and evil. The understanding of karma provides a channel for equanimous good wishes, such as, "may you be able to bear with the karma you are creating." Or it could help to phrase the wish in more mundane terms, such as, "may you stop harming yourself," or "may you learn to cope with your challenges more skillfully."

Now let's say you've made your good wishes for the person shooting drugs and have recovered your good humour and are back to wishing well to strangers as you pass them by. Then you spy a couple with their arms around one another, obviously deeply in love. Once again, the metta wish, "may you be happy," doesn't fit, as they're already so obviously happy. They don't need your good wishes on that account. In this case, you need to form your good wishes in a way that acknowledges and honours their existing happiness. This brings us to mudita or appreciative joy, which is the Brahma Vihara I want to talk about tonight.

Mudita tunes into our natural human capacity for joy and gives us a skillful way to build on that. The classic phrase to cultivate mudita is "may your happiness continue, may your happiness increase." If your mudita channels are open, you'll be delighted for them and get a little shot of joy yourself into the bargain. And as you pass them by and continue wishing well to those all around, your good wishes will have an extra animation. With mudita, happiness is multiplied. The happiness of the couple became your happiness. Mudita is all about appreciating the good things in life.

Buddhism tends to have a bad reputation in this department because of the emphasis on the first noble truth of dukkha. But joy is also very much part of the Dhamma. It will certainly be there when we're fully developed, as described in this verse from the Dhammapada: "Happy indeed we live, we who possess nothing. Feeders on joy we shall be, like the radiant gods."

But joy isn't only for when we've reached such an exalted state. After spending years doing mortification practices and deciding they led nowhere, the Buddha then remembered his joyful experience as a child under the rose apple tree, watching his father ploughing. The mortification practices had dismissed joy as worthless, but now the Buddha questioned himself on this. He realised the joy he had experienced wasn't to do with attachment to the world but was what he described as a blameless joy. He decided he'd no longer dismiss that and instead would actively cultivate it as an aid to meditation. Thus we have joy as a factor of enlightenment. The Pali term for this is pīti. In this case, joy emerges from fascination with the pursuit of truth. We're glad to be seeking out and sensing the path to freedom. It's not linked to anything specific in life, like seeing a couple in love. Mudita, on the other hand, arises when we are touched by the beauty of life—young love, the birth of a baby, the smile of a friend. It's the response of gladness to the good things in life.

In meditation we rejoice in freedom, letting go of our attachments in life. In mudita we rejoice in life itself. Is there not a contradiction?

To embrace both sources of joy is part of our path to freedom. For example, we need families to help us through infancy and childhood. We need some level of education to be able to hear and understand the Dhamma. We need a stable society to give us the possibility of retreat centers where we can practice meditation. And of course we need food, clean air, water, and medicine to keep us alive until our moment of enlightenment, when we fully understand that which goes beyond life and death. Although freedom, nibbana, is not dependent on education or families or a stable society, we can only

find our path to freedom in the midst of all these. At one level, mudita can be seen as a thank you to all the conditions that allow for ourselves and others to tread the path to freedom.

Mudita builds on our natural joie de vivre. As babies, we took delight in seeing faces we recognised, playing with whoever and whatever came our way, in food and comfort and being able to explore and learn. This delight only led to dukkha because of attachment, the mistake of believing we could control and own all the lovely stuff. But the delight itself animated us, let us develop confidence and trust, helped us smile and make connections and learn to communicate. Mudita cultivates delight with all its benefits for our psyche, and perhaps also for our bodies, without the delusion of attachment.

Our baby's capacity for delight is still there, even though it might by now seem buried under tons of depression and anxiety. To recapture our joie de vivre, we need to reflect on what really nurtures us and make a deliberate attempt to appreciate all these. The Mahamangala Sutta, which we chant last thing at night, gives the Buddha's list of things we can rejoice in. He places associating with wise companions first among the list of great blessings.

If you have a meditation group, you're really lucky. Not only does it get you onto the cushion regularly, it also gives you the chance to discuss the Dharma and how it applies to the many challenges in life. Trying to put our understanding into words really helps it sharpen. It can be uncomfortable, as we only notice all our confusions when we try to put our vague notions into a string of words. But every attempt is worthwhile for both you and your friends. Together you can help each other sort through some of the confusions and let each person's unique perspective become part of the group wisdom. Try making the wish, "May our happiness continue. May our happiness increase," whenever you meet up with your group.

The next on the list is residing in a suitable place, meaning somewhere that encourages and supports us in our practice. Certainly Satipanya fits the bill, but your own home can be conducive to meditation practice too. For some people, making a small shrine helps, or setting aside a room for meditation. For me, the main thing has been to establish the habit of a daily practice. Over the years, this became more and more central to my life, a deep source of refuge. After a challenging day at work, it was such a relief to know that in the evening I could close the door behind me and let meditation clean out the layer of fractious energy that had built up over the day. So if we're lucky enough to have a home, we have a deep reason to rejoice. Caring for our home, keeping it clean and tidy, and adding touches of beauty are also part of mudita practice, a way of saying thank you for this precious gift.

Beauty might seem unnecessary. After all, we're cultivating equanimity, so why should we care whether things are drab or pretty? But that line of thinking is drawing us towards indifference rather than equanimity. It encourages a "don't care, doesn't matter" attitude to the world, whereas true equanimity only exists within a deep care for the world. Beautifying our surroundings is a way to express that care. It also shows sensitivity to the way the human body and psyche thrive on pleasure. The feelings we recognise as pleasant vedana have a soothing effect on our bodies and mind. I imagine various hormones are released to calm our nervous systems. Why not give ourselves every opportunity for such benefits?

The Buddha appreciated beauty. In the Parinibbana Sutta, which tracks the last stages of his life, we find him wandering from one shrine to another. Along the way, he says to Ananda, "Come, Ananda, let us go to Vesali. Pleasant, Ananda, is Vesali. Pleasant are the shrines of Udena, Gotamaka, Satambaka, Bahuputa, Sarandada and Kapala." In fact, he repeats this a number of times as he moves from shrine to shrine, as if the memory of their beauty meant a lot to him. You can imagine the effort it would have taken for a dying man of eighty years to walk from place to place, and yet this is how he spent his last days. The way he kept repeating the list of beautiful shrines suggests their memory gave him energy for the journey. We can take this as encouragement to adorn our homes and whatever we value as supporting us in life.

And of course, our home wouldn't exist if it weren't for all the supporting social structures around us—roads, shops, sewage pipes and electricity, as well as courts of law that uphold our right to lock the door behind us and meditate. Every aspect of the society we live in contributes something to the fact that we have time and space to practice, Dhamma books to read, Dhamma talks to listen to. Think of the enormous web of conditions that allowed Buddhist teachings to reach our Western ears. Seeing things this way, any contribution we make towards society can be done in the spirit of mudita.

Say the water pressure drops and we have to get onto the local council to get it sorted. Generally, we think of this as a real pain in the neck. But just think of what a gift it is to have fresh water on tap. It was my mother's ninetieth birthday recently, and as part of the celebration, she decided to write up the story of her life. When she was young, the family water had to be drawn from a spring in a boggy field a good distance from the house. And if you wanted it heated, it was a question of lighting the fire and pouring buckets of water into a cauldron for a few hours. Reflecting on how much extra time we have because we don't have to walk miles to collect water from a well each day—this might bring a sense of gratitude into our dealings with the council. We might even take little jolts of hope and joy away with us every time we get a helpful response.

Now, of course, you could argue that rejoicing in your local council and your home and meditation group is only going to lead to dukkha when these go the way of all earthly phenomena and eventually fall apart. That line of thinking represents fear of attachment, not wisdom. Our problem is that we're already deeply attached to our possessions, friends, and activities, as well as to our social status as householders deserving of running water in our taps. Deciding not to rejoice in these won't help matters at all. We only learn the art of non-attachment by experiencing the pain that comes when these things fall apart. So we might as well go through that pain for the sake of worthy attachments, like all those the Buddha suggests.

And as we get more and more involved in the meditation group, we'll find our buttons being pushed left, right and centre. All this shows us our attachment to personality styles, ideas of how the group should be run, interpretations of the Dhamma, preferences for meditation techniques, and so on. If we didn't put any effort into bonding with the group, we could just float in and out of the meetings, congratulating ourselves on our equanimity and raising our eyes to heaven when we hear squabbles among the more established members. But this is to mistake indifference for equanimity. We only learn true equanimity by putting our heart into our activities, making deep connections, and bearing with any reactionary pain as part of our learning curve. Mudita helps us open our hearts to form those essential connections.

Next on the Buddha's list is the joy at having done meritorious actions. We easily miss this source of mudita. Say, for example, we help an elderly person cross the road. It would be very easy to dismiss this with words like, "That was nothing—anyone would have done the same thing." But according to the Buddha, we are to rejoice at every good deed. We need to say "well done" to ourselves for any small act of kindness or generosity.

I found this really helped with my recovery from laryngectomy. I couldn't find any joy in my new state until it occurred to me to think of my role in life as someone who cared for a laryngectomee. I started to see every little thing I had to do—cleaning the various tubes, taking medicine, doing exercises—as acts of kindness for someone who had suffered laryngectomy. This gave me a new source of joy, and with that my self-confidence started to recover. And when I recovered enough to be able to do a few things for others, these really meant a lot. It might just have been that I cut the vegetables for dinner or sorted through the recycling bins. Before the illness I wouldn't have paid much heed to these, but after a long spell of being totally dependent, I saw how much joy was on offer from being able to play a role in society.

Now, of course, we can get attached to our roles and get very uptight when we're not appreciated. But if we keep reminding ourselves that our motivation is kindness and congratulating ourselves for that kindness, this undercuts the attachment. Reflecting on the law of kamma helps with this. We shape our future happiness or unhappiness depending on the motivation for our actions. Acting out of kindness sows seeds for future happiness; acting out of anger or meanness sows seeds of unhappiness. Kamma is our only real possession in life. Everything else will fall apart in time. So we're looking after our future self really well when we do things out of kindness. And we can definitely congratulate ourselves for every good deed.

Further on in the Mangala Sutta, the Buddha includes supporting our families as a blessing in which to rejoice. There's so much involved in family life—all the daily chores of cooking and cleaning, educating children, caring for older parents. Can we make a practice of joy out of all this? For that, we have to spend quality time with our family, rather than let it all become a burden of hard work. Eating together is one way of expressing value for one another, along with activities like sports, playing cards, Scrabble, crosswords, going for walks—whatever pastimes your family enjoys. If we're not careful, television can become a mind-numbing escape from interaction. But we can also make it a focus for shared enjoyment, chatting about the programme like they do on Gogglebox.

Remember, kāma is about motivation, not the activity itself. If our motivation for watching TV is to have some relaxing and enjoyable time with our family, we're on the right track. To help with this, we can inject little muditā wishes every now and again: "May our happiness continue. May our happiness increase."

Having said that, we have to take care that our activities don't violate the precepts. We can't justify watching pornography or sadism by saying, "May my happiness continue, may my happiness increase." So we have to choose forms of entertainment which stimulate wonder, for example, or humour, or understanding of human nature, or appreciation of skill.

The Buddha isn't asking us to neglect our families, homes, or society for the sake of enlightenment. Instead, we bring all these within the definition of what is our path by appreciating them and adding to their beauty or joy wherever possible, while we remind ourselves that they cannot be relied upon for lasting happiness.

We can find any number of occasions for muditā, but it can be quite a challenge because earthly joys don't last forever and because we can't own them or control them to any meaningful degree. It can be quite poignant. This is why muditā can be quite a challenging brahmavihāra.

I sometimes find myself preferring funerals to weddings, for example. There is some comfort in knowing it's okay to feel and express sorrow, whereas there can be a confusing disconnect when sadness is felt but it's not the appropriate emotion to express. At a wedding, if we're feeling depressed, the effort to keep smiling and making small talk can be quite wearying.

The ephemeral nature of joy means that like all phenomena, it fades away moment after moment. Unless we have a background level of peace within ourselves, the experience of joy fading away can be so hard to bear that we find ways of excluding it altogether. This process underlies the far enemies of muditā, which centre around jealousy for other people's happiness and disparaging our own sources of happiness.

Many myths and legends illustrate the destructive power of jealousy. In the Bible, we have the first record of murder when Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy for the favour God showed to Abel. A bit later, Joseph is set upon by all ten of his elder brothers, who are jealous of the love their father showers on his younger son. And Snow White was cast out of the palace by the jealous queen, who couldn't bear to be judged less beautiful than her stepdaughter.

All these stories go on to illustrate how jealousy destroys the one who harbours it. Cain becoming an outcast, Joseph's brothers suffering famine and imprisonment, and the wicked queen having to dance herself to death in red-hot slippers at Snow White's wedding.

Shakespeare gives a graphic illustration of the self-destructive power of jealousy when Iago warns Othello: "O beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on."

These epic stories show jealousy in the form of murderous rage, but its power can also drive the drip-drip destructiveness of peevishness. In fear of their success, we denigrate our rival's achievement as worthless. Caught up in the throes of jealousy, their success implies our failure, and the only way to relieve our pain is to belittle their achievement.

To the extent that we're identified with our skills and talents, we're in danger of jealousy when another exhibits a similar talent. If you read *Little Women*, you'll remember the night Amy burned her sister Jo's precious manuscript in a fit of jealousy. The 1950 Nobel Prize was said to have been offered to Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla for their work in electromagnetism, but they both refused to accept it if the other person was to be included. Jealousy can destroy any partnership, be it artistic, scientific, business, or even religious—Devadatta's attempt to kill the Buddha being a prime example.

Jealousy also ruins personal relationships. We want our partner to be totally bound up in us. If they enjoy someone else's company, we take it as betrayal. And of course, if they leave us for another, we're in an agony of hatred for both parties.

Practising muditā for ourselves is a powerful antidote to jealousy. We build self-confidence by appreciating ourselves and especially every effort we make—good kamma for ourselves. As we build our own sense of self-worth, we're less threatened by the talents or good fortune of others. Congratulating ourselves is in itself an exercise in muditā. It stirs joy. A healthy sense of ourselves is worthwhile. We need this healthy sense of self to sustain us on the path.

Sometimes we mistake the teaching on anattā, not-self, to mean that we shouldn't have any sense of self. So whenever we feel a sense of self, we condemn ourselves, saying, "I shouldn't feel like this" or "I shouldn't be here." But the Buddha often uses the word "self" in a very positive way. For example, he says that if we truly care for ourselves, we will practise the Dhamma.

Let's face it, the teaching on anattā can be very confusing. I appreciate Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro's interpretation that sometimes the sense of self is appropriate and helps us along the path, while other times it leads to suffering. Our job is to get better and better at recognising whether we should let our sense of self help us do what we need to do, or whether it's one of those times when the sense of self is curling itself around some habit based on greed, aversion, or delusion—in which case, of course, we need to let it go.

When our judgement tells us that what we're doing is wise, we strengthen the sense of self needed to follow through on the activity. But when we've done the activity and the self wants to do it again and again for no good reason, then it's time to accept the truth of anattā and let that sense of self dissolve.

So the self is something to care for, according to the Buddha. The only thing we have to worry about is making the mistake of expecting it to give us permanent happiness. Like everything else in this phenomenal universe, it is temporary and contingent. But of all the temporary contingent entities we find here, the self is the most important, the one we must cherish most deeply. To practise the Dhamma is to care deeply for ourselves.

We give ourselves the gift of mindfulness moment after moment, asking nothing in return. As you all know, this is a tough challenge. We fortify ourselves for this challenge by appreciating every good deed we do, thanking ourselves for every effort we've made

to practice, congratulating ourselves for everything we do well. This is strengthening the sense of self that does wise actions. Just as an ideal parent would praise and encourage their child, we must do the same for our poor, downtrodden selves.

Denigration is less dramatic than jealousy, but also powerfully destructive. In fact, it's such a quiet form of negativity that we hardly notice it. What's happening is that we see the joy as too little to bother appreciating. So we disparage our incredibly good fortune of living in a peaceful society, having shelter and enough to eat. We rarely remember to be grateful for the gift of the Dhamma or for having friends to practice with. We only appreciate our health when it's gone.

Denigration also destroys relationships. Belittling a child or partner is a powerful form of bullying. It keeps the other from flourishing. The belittled party comes to believe in their worthlessness. Their personality and talents wither. Lucy illustrated this perfectly in a Peanuts comic strip, saying, "The trouble with you, Charlie Brown, is that you're you."

Apart from the interpersonal level, we regularly extend our disparaging remarks to collective aspects of human endeavour, remembering only the failures of institutions, politicians, technology, and society. This bespeaks bitterness, resulting from our repeated attempts to shut joy out of our hearts.

For some strange reason, we're often encouraged culturally to denigrate ourselves. "I'm no good at this." "I always make a mess of things." "I can't ever get things right." In one sense, it's a form of appeasement, a way of saying, "I'm not a threat to you." It defines us as one of the gang. If we see it in that playful way, just a form of social pleasantry, then it's not harmful. But to the extent that we're really convinced of it, we're damaging ourselves.

None of us would like to be thought of as a bully, and yet the self-disparaging remarks we make to ourselves are actually those of a bully. We are shaming ourselves rather than seeing the liberating truth of anattā—that I cannot be expected to get everything right because conditions are always beyond my control. We can start to undo the habit of self-denigration by practising muditā for ourselves, saying "well done" even just for putting on our shoes—mindfully, of course.

The near enemy of muditā is excitement and excess. It's natural to get excited when there's something to celebrate, but indulging this only brings the inevitable downer when the party's over. Think of the excess around Christmas and weddings. The same

goes for other supposedly religious celebrations. In Ireland, many families go into huge debt over First Communion outfits, for example. Even when we invite a friend to tea, we can go over the top in preparations.

We mistake this daft excess for muditā because we're so happy about the celebration. But the joy goes to our head and escalates. In this heady exuberance, we lose all sense of proportion. And in the frenetic excitement, things can go badly wrong. Rivalries flare over matters of style and taste and who should sit where. For all these reasons, celebrations can be more stressful than happy.

Excessive exuberance turns sour very easily. Think of the riots that can follow football matches. I know one sister who hasn't spoken with her brother since an incident at her daughter's christening. In some forms of illness such as bipolar depression, the high set up by the celebration can lead to depression afterwards.

The far enemies of jealousy and denigration shut out joy, while the near enemies of excitement and excess cling to it. For muditā, we need to find the middle way—opening our hearts to the good things in life while also relaxing, taking it easy, not building things out of proportion.

It's a tightrope. One moment we're singing someone's praises; the next we've exhausted all our goodwill and we're hoping they'll get their comeuppance. Just being aware of which side of the tightrope we've fallen off tells us what needs to be cultivated right now.

In formal meditation, we start off by thinking of someone who has recently had cause for celebration—for example, someone who has become a parent or grandparent, got a new job, or won a prize. We then wish that their happiness will continue and increase. One variant on the classic phrase that I like is: "I'm happy that you're happy." It usually makes me feel happy too. You could also try a simple "well done." Or in some cases, "thank you" might fit the bill. Use whatever phrase best sustains your sense of appreciation when you think of that person.

It doesn't matter if you can't think of a reason for celebration. Imagine them smiling at a joke, or enjoying a book, or having coffee with a friend. The simplest daily activities can form the basis for muditā.

As with all the Brahma Viharas, the self can be a particularly challenging category. Remember that any way your life is going well—family, professional, social, hobbies, physical fitness, meditation practice—has taken hard work and commitment and deserves appreciation. Sometimes a very simple image works best for me. I picture myself petting the dog or scattering breadcrumbs for the birds, and I say, "Well done."

If, when you offer muditā to yourself, you feel vanity surface, just note this. We need to learn to take a healthy pride in our achievements. Once we're mindful of vanity, it won't spiral into self-delusion. Similarly, if you feel yourself contracting in jealousy or heady with excitement, just note these, set them aside, and continue. Take a few breaths between good wishes to help you keep balance and perspective.

If jealousy becomes overpowering, try turning attention to your own successes instead, murmuring "well done" to yourself for these. An alternative that I often find helpful is to encompass the jealousy within a good wish, such as "May competition between us bring out the best in us both," or if the jealousy is about a personal relationship, I've used the wish "May your love for others help me to love them too."

And as usual, if the near or far enemies or any other hindrances get so overwhelming that none of the remedies works, take a vipassanā break and only return to muditā when you feel more balanced.

I want to finish with a few words about working with the near and far enemies in daily life. For example, we easily get overexcited about celebrations, especially if we're involved in the planning stage. Noting this is the first and at times the hardest step. We can be so caught up in our plans that we forget to be in any way mindful. They just take us over. Sooner or later, we'll notice that we're going over the top. Then we have to find strategies to calm ourselves. Mindful breaths, mindful footsteps, mindful actions—all these help.

Also, take a moment to think of the event you're celebrating. Ironically, we easily forget this in the midst of all the fussing. If it's a birthday party, take a moment to bring the person to mind and wish them a happy birthday. Very often, this brings us back down to earth for a while. Often we fuss about the arrangements because we want to impress people. If you think that could be the case, take time for some self-directed good wishes as a means of bolstering a healthy sense of your own value and protecting you from going into great excess.

While excitement shows particularly during the planning stage, the far enemies tend to show up during or in the aftermath of the celebration. As host, we might feel peeved that people aren't more appreciative. As guest, we might be fed up pretending we're happy. And as the door closes, both parties may be thinking, "Thank God that's over." Celebration isn't easy.

Often problems come about because we feel we ought to be happy. This puts us under pressure, which in itself quells a lot of happiness. So remember that we don't have to feel happy to practice muditā. The fact that we've taken the time to mark the occasion is enough. We can keep reminding ourselves of this whenever we feel jealousy, boredom, or irritation setting in.

Say we're at a graduation party. After an hour or so we get fed up hearing about all the courses and exams they passed and wish they had just dropped out after the first day. Any effort to be happy on their account sets our teeth on edge. Our practice with the small stuff can help here. Although our heart has closed down at the thought of our friend's great achievement, we might still be able to enjoy the food or see the beauty of a flower arrangement, or we might get a little lift by listening to the music playing in the background. Ironically, even our misery can be a basis for muditā, as we say "well done" to ourselves for every moment we endure in our efforts to celebrate our friend's achievement.

I hope this talk has helped clarify the importance of joy in the spiritual path. In meditation we have the joy of pīti, which results from interest in the process leading to liberation. It's what keeps us coming back to the cushion, back on retreat, despite all the dukkha we witness there. In daily life we're sustained by muditā, by the joy that arises naturally when things go well for us. We cultivate muditā by paying deliberate attention to anything that makes life pleasant, inspiring, or easy, and getting into the habit of saying "thank you" and "well done" many times every day.

An especially important aspect of muditā is to rejoice in our own good deeds and every attempt we make to practice meditation and incorporate the Dhamma into our lives. Congratulating ourselves for all these builds up the self-confidence we need to follow the path to liberation.

May our efforts to cultivate muditā bring joy to our lives and to the lives of those we love.

CHAPTER 23

Sense Contact - The Six Sense Spheres

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

> *In this retreat talk, Noirín Sheahan offers a detailed exploration of the six sense spheres (saḷāyatana) as presented in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She situates this teaching within the broader context of the Dhammānupassanā section, explaining how contemplation of the sense spheres differs from working with the hindrances and the five aggregates (khandhas). While the hindrances require us to fight our way clear of dukkha like spiritual warriors, and the khandhas help us understand entrapment, the sense spheres teaching directs attention to the boundary between our inner subjective world and the outer objective world—the very point where we can choose freedom over clinging.*
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> *Sheahan illuminates how the Buddha identified four components necessary for sense contact: the sense object, the medium enabling perception, our sensory apparatus, and crucially, attention itself. Drawing on personal meditation experiences—from listening to blackbird song to gazing at a Buddha rūpa—she demonstrates how careful attention at sense contact reveals the illusory nature of separation between observer and observed, offering glimpses into the teaching of anattā. She connects this contemplation to the wheel of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), showing how saṅkhāras rooted in ignorance find their way through our sense doors to make contact with the world.*
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> *The practical heart of this teaching lies in recognizing the 'fetter' (saṃyojana) that arises dependent on both sense organ and sense object—not inherent in either, but in our reactive tendencies of desire, aversion, and delusion. Through vivid examples, including noticing eye movements while eating and discovering her own patterns of denial, Sheahan shows how maintaining mindfulness at sense contact prevents the wheel from completing its full cycle into dukkha. This practice becomes an art of freedom—learning to immerse ourselves in the world without clinging.*

Tonight's talk is on the six sense spheres.

You may remember that in the final section of the Satipatthana Sutta, the section on Dhammas, the Buddha asks us to contemplate various of his teachings. He starts with the hindrances, then the khandas or aggregates, which we looked at last night. Next, he lists the six sense spheres.

All of these direct our attention to the origin and nature of suffering and offer us means of escape, but each in their own unique way.

The teaching on the hindrances asks us to get to know the moment-to-moment experience of the forces that disturb our peace of mind. We become familiar with their physical and mental expression. The more deeply we know them, the less they dominate us. Our bodies may vibrate with their energy, we perceive how they are tempting us, but we can make an independent decision about how to act. At times, we may decide to use the energetic pathways they stimulate—for example, to use aversion to invigorate assertiveness when we're feeling threatened, or use desire to enthuse us to accomplish something beneficial. At other times it's a question of letting go of their energy moment after moment until this episode of the hindrance burns itself out.

This first of the Dhammas listed in the Satipatthana Sutta shows us a very immediate and dynamic method of freeing ourselves from suffering. The teaching of the hindrances can be likened to skills training for a spiritual warrior.

By contrast, I think of the next teaching as a more composed enterprise, such as a scientific expedition. This is the teaching on the khandas, the five aggregates of clinging. We're not being threatened by a hindrance here, but we're deliberately bringing ourselves into the zone of their influence in order to get a feel for what binds us to suffering. We let attention dwell on our bodies, for example, to experience how we get drawn into anxieties as the tendency to think of this as "my body" comes to mind. One moment the breath is registered as simply a physical sensation. The next moment we've added a lorryload of meaning to this, all tethered to thoughts of me and mine. Similarly for all the other khandas—we experience their allure and then the pain of entrapment. And we say to ourselves, "I'm not going to get caught like that again." Thus, the study of the khandas strengthens the wisdom we need to avoid new entanglements with dukkha.

The teaching on the six sense spheres also has the nature of scientific inquiry. This time, the focus is not just on how we tend to get trapped, which is what we're studying in the khandas, but equally on finding the moment-to-moment pathway to freedom. The sense spheres direct our attention to the boundary between our internal subjective world and the external objective world. Resting attention here, we can experience the draw towards clinging and dukkha and the possibility of freedom and release. This is the choice on offer to us at each moment of sense contact. The better we get at recognizing these pathways, the more easily we choose the pathway to freedom.

As with the teaching on the hindrances, this teaching on the sense spheres offers us a very dynamic, immediate tool for moment-to-moment release from suffering. In the case of the hindrances, we've been caught in a thick bramble of dukkha and we're fight-

ing our way clear. In the case of the sense spheres, we're brushing up against a thicket and finding out how to steer clear. We're releasing ourselves from the delusion that lets us get caught in the first place.

The spheres are made up of the five physical senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. These can all be described as doorways connecting us to the external world of visible objects, sounds, flavours, aromas, and tactile sensations. Normally when we say "sixth sense" we mean an intuition or gut feeling, something outside of the normal sensory realm. But in Buddhism, the sixth sense is the doorway to the ordinary experiences of thought, memory, and emotion. The sixth sense sphere comprises the conscious mind and the sense object that the mind perceives.

This is how the Buddha advises us to contemplate the sense spheres: "How does one contemplate Dhammas in terms of the six sense spheres? One knows the eye and forms, and the fetter that arises dependent on both. One knows the ears and sounds, and the fetter that arises dependent on both." And so on for all the six senses.

We'll come to the fetter in a moment, but first let's look at the guidance to know the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds. This may sound pretty straightforward, but in fact it points us towards quite a mysterious aspect of life, one which has puzzled scientists and sages for centuries. Normally, we would only be aware of the forms, sounds, and so forth. We see a cat, we hear a bell. But when we're being mindful of the sense spheres, we also know we are seeing and hearing. This makes us more aware of sense contact as the interface between our inner and outer worlds. It helps break down the illusion of separation.

The cat isn't just out there. I am seeing it. I've let it into my mind where it can generate all kinds of thoughts and feelings about cats. I might not want to think any of these thoughts, but I can't help it now that the cat's got in.

I sensed this one time as I was meditating and became aware of a bird singing. It was a blackbird. You know the way they whistle a tune and after a pause, a different one. I noticed how my mood lightened each time I heard the notes and how eagerly I was anticipating the next trill during the pauses. Suddenly the thought occurred to me: Where is the bird?

Is he in here or out there? Intellectually, of course, I knew the bird was outside of me. But I'd suddenly realised the key role I was playing in our interaction. It was my ears and my brain that were doing all their magical processing work to detect the sound and register it in my mind. So it seemed we were both co-creators of the sound.

This gave me a graphic illustration of the Buddha's teaching on the sense spheres and how attending carefully to our sense data can break down the illusion of there being a "me" who is in here, in control of my world, and totally separate from the world out there. On top of that, it seemed the bird was determining my moods and thoughts. When he chose to sing, I would feel glad. When he chose to pause, I would start getting a bit anxious. So from the emotional point of view, he was in charge, not me.

Both of these insights gave me tiny glimpses of the Buddha's teaching on anattā—that the sense of ourselves as permanent, substantial, and in control of our lives is an illusion. Listening mindfully to that bird song had taught me that there wasn't any clear dividing line between myself and the blackbird.

I had a similar experience one time, gazing at a Buddha rūpa. I was alone in the meditation hall, and for a while I was seeing the rūpa in quite an ordinary way. Then suddenly, though I was still gazing at the image, my attention was drawn to the "me" who was gazing. Again I sensed the very active part I was playing in the process of seeing. Though the rūpa was out there, it needed my attention to create the image that my consciousness was registering.

I sensed my attention as creative, a form of goodwill. By choosing to attend to the Buddha rūpa, I was bringing this image into being for myself. At that moment I couldn't tell whether the image was really out there or whether my attention was actually creating the image and just imagining it to be out there. I realised that my subjective experience of the world could not be separated from what I normally thought of as the objective world out there.

Curiously, I had experienced this insight as a child, wondering if other people really existed when I wasn't looking at them. I spent a while peeping through keyholes, wondering if I could catch them magically coming into existence so as to perform for me. But after a while I realised that I could never catch them out that way. The moment I had seen them, it was already too late for my experiment.

In Zen, the puzzle is captured in the story of two monks who are looking at a flag waving in the breeze and arguing about whether it is the flag or the wind that is moving. The teacher intervenes, saying, "Neither the flag nor the wind are moving. It is only your minds that are moving."

The conundrum has been debated in Western philosophy since it was posed by George Berkeley and is expressed in the question: If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? The question has puzzled physicists as well. A conversa-

tion between Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr is recorded where Einstein asked Bohr whether the moon exists when no one is looking at it. Bohr replied that no matter how hard he tried, he could not prove that it did exist.

Einstein and Bohr's interest in the question would have been stirred by a recent peculiar finding in quantum physics, termed the observer effect. It applies to small subatomic particles that are the building blocks of our physical reality—electrons and protons, for example. If you try to describe any of these according to its quantum equation, what you find is that it has the potential to be almost anywhere in the universe. The act of observation changes all that. It forces the particle to show up somewhere or other.

This was first detected for electrons, those tiny particles that flow in every electrical current. If you try to pin down an electron and detect whether it goes through one specific place or another, it will behave as you expect and go through one pathway or the other. But if you don't switch on your detectors so you don't know which pathway it went through, it will behave as if it has simultaneously gone through both.

Weird as this sounds, the phenomenon underlies your cell phone and remote control and almost every device you use nowadays. Basically, quantum mechanics describes what Einstein called a very spooky world. Matter can be anywhere and everywhere at once. It can penetrate through solid barriers. Particles make instantaneous communication with one another even over vast distances. And the observer effect, taken literally, implies that subjective observation may actually be playing a huge role in determining the physical state of the world.

Quantum physics describes a world which no one truly knows how to interpret. Most mainstream scientists ignore the deeper questions and follow Dirac's injunction to "shut up and calculate"—and perhaps I should also follow their lead and leave off trying to explain that spooky quantum world. But it is a big draw for me, and as the teaching on the six sense spheres directs our attention to that mysterious interface between subjectivity and objectivity, which has also been thrown up by quantum physics, I couldn't resist the temptation. I hope that drawing your attention to the mystery might entice you to rest attention at sense contact and let curiosity and wonder maintain your meditation on this so common aspect of life that we so easily skip over.

However, let's go back to the teaching on the sense spheres. The Buddha taught that four things are needed in order to make sense contact. Two are part of the external world: the sense object itself—the sound, the aroma, the visible form—and the medium that enables this to be sensed. For example, we need light to see a visible object; we won't see in the dark. The other components needed for sense contact are internal. We need our sensory apparatus—our eyes, ears, and so forth. Finally, we need attention.

This was what had struck me so forcibly when I looked at the Buddha Rupa. I realised my attention was a central and necessary part of the image I was seeing.

Thus, the sense spheres form that link between our internal world and the external world. The Buddha doesn't comment on the question of whether consciousness affects the external world. His focus is not on philosophy, but on the possibility of freeing ourselves from dukkha. But he certainly wants us to link the external and the internal. He doesn't want us to think in terms of cats and blackbirds and Buddha Rupas as objects out there. He wants us to experience how our attention and sense organs combine with these to bring about sense contact. He wants us to experience the meeting point of the internal and external world.

Sometimes the use of the passive voice in our noting words can help here. Instead of saying "hearing, hearing" as we listen to birdsong, we can say "sound being heard." This is a more awkward phrase, but it helps us to take in the subjectivity of our experience. It directs attention to the all-important but ever-so-quiet knowing aspect of our experience. Our fascination with the external world of sounds and sights might fade for a while as we get drawn toward the mystery of consciousness itself.

To deepen our understanding of the internal factors underlying sense contact, let's go back to the wheel of dependent origination. The sense spheres form the midsection of the wheel, and it's the first half of the wheel that describes our subjective role in sense contact.

It all starts with avijja, our misunderstanding about what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. Avijja, ignorance, forms the breeding ground for unwholesome sankaras. Sankaras are the habits of mind which push us into and through our lives. In order to exercise their driving power, they need to become conscious. The third link in the wheel lets us become conscious of the sankara rooted in ignorance.

For consciousness to manifest in the world, we need both body and mind. Our bodies are part of the physical world of matter; our minds inhabit the world of thought and imagination. The pair are termed nama-rupa and form the fourth link in the wheel. Thus our sankara habit drives our body as well as our mind. If we are habitually angry, our jaws and teeth may be clenched most of the time. If we worry habitually, our forehead will probably develop creases from frowning.

The sankara now needs to decide which of our senses to work through. So now we're up to the six sense spheres again. The next link in the wheel is their internal subjective component, the six sense doors. The sankara can find its way through any of these. A

sankara of ill-will can listen morosely to a conversation, waiting for something to disagree with. A sankara of greed can look through our eyes, searching for something to devour.

Then the sense doors link up with the external world, and this meeting place of the sankara with the world forms the sixth link in the wheel: sense contact. A new bit of sense data impacts on our psycho-physical system. It could be a sound, it could be a sight, it could be a thought.

We usually think of thoughts and emotions as part of our internal world, but they can also be objective. When greed finds its way into consciousness, the thought of ice cream can make us run to the fridge. When goodwill is established, that same thought can stir happy memories, joy, and gratitude. When ill-will plants itself in consciousness and we sense the emotion of anger, it's easy to add the second arrow and hate ourselves for being angry. When compassion implants itself, the emotion of anger becomes something to care for tenderly. So thoughts and emotions can act as objects for whatever is appearing through the sense door.

The teaching on the sense spheres directs our attention to this crucial midsection of the wheel of dependent origination, where our sankara based in ignorance has found its way from our inner subjective world to the outer objective world. If we are not careful, a whole new pathway for dukkha opens up. But if we are mindful, then we have the opportunity to let that sankara fizzle its energy away, trying to get us to react while we steadfastly refuse.

It helps to become curious about how our moods and emotions seem to colour the world. If we're in a flaming temper, we won't hear the bees buzzing in the same way as we would if we were in good humour. In fact, we probably won't hear them at all, or any nature sounds, because of the storm of rage going on in our minds.

Last night I described my own striking example of this. I was doing some walking meditation on retreat, being quite happy, until someone came in and started walking near me. I could have sworn the room went dark. Because I was being mindful, I could see that the darkening was internal and that my mood had suddenly gone from good humour to bad humour. But I still had to look out the window to be sure the weather hadn't changed. I hadn't ever noticed before that my mood could literally colour the visual scene in front of me. This gave me a striking example of how our sankaras affect our perception of the world.

We can see this too when we're feeling dull or lethargic. All our sense data is blurred. We'll only vaguely be aware of what's around us, hardly noticing any sounds or sights. But then if we hear our name called, we're suddenly alert and hear and see everything in detail. It was the same data falling on our ears and eyes, but experienced differently because of the sankaras of dullness and alertness.

This also underlies the way people can describe the same situation very differently. Say a husband and wife go to talk to a financial advisor about getting a loan for an extension. The husband really wants the loan, but his wife is not so keen about getting into debt. When they talk about it afterwards, it's very likely that the wife will remember all the dangers mentioned but will be vague about any encouraging remarks, while the husband will have picked up all the encouragement and skimmed over the warnings. Again, it's the same input data, but being perceived differently because of their different sankaras.

If we follow the Buddha's advice to see both the sense object and the sense door, we'd be much better at discerning how our subjective stance is colouring the situation. We get into the habit of asking ourselves: How am I looking? Am I looking at this with suspicion or with friendliness? How am I listening? Am I looking for errors in what's being said? Am I eager to agree with it all?

When our sankara, rooted in ignorance, makes contact with the world through any of the sense doors, the wheel has turned halfway around, and unless we are mindful, it will easily complete the full cycle to cause dukkha.

To prevent this, let's return to the advice of the Buddha regarding the sense spheres: "One knows the eye and forms and the fetter that arises dependent on both. One knows the ears and sounds and the fetter that arises dependent on both." And so on for all six senses. Fetter means that which ties us to suffering, to the endless round of birth and death. So here he is encapsulating all of the links from sense contact onwards which spin us into dukkha.

To recap the final links of the wheel: Our system responds to each sense contact by classifying it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the link of feelings. Unless we're being mindful, we react to our feelings with desire, aversion, or ignoring. This is the start of the trouble. We desire more of the pleasant, we want to get rid of what is unpleasant, and we ignore whatever is neutral.

To accomplish these three outcomes, our system then generates a sense of self. Thoughts of "me" and "mine" start to emerge, gathering all our motivation towards our new goal. This is the link of clinging. In our gardening analogy, the weed has blossomed; it is fully formed and has the stamp of identity.

The next thing it needs to do is sow some seeds. This is the link of becoming, where we decide to speak or act or scheme to fulfil our desires. We are now exercising our will to change something in the world. This is crucial to our future happiness because sankara seeds sown at this point are likely to emerge again at the second link of the wheel, getting a new cycle going in the future. That's why this step is termed becoming. Basically, we create the habits which tie us to suffering by acting on our desires and aversions and ignoring what doesn't seem relevant to our agenda.

As a result, we get the next step: the start of some new activity, termed birth. This is the penultimate step in the wheel of dependent origination. Once we've decided to fulfil a desire for food, we get ourselves over to the cupboard to have a snack. Every step on the journey, every move of our arm to open the cupboard and then the biscuit tin, requires an act of will. The wheel is spinning through hundreds, perhaps thousands of cycles. Each of these sows another seed for the sankara of greed. So the new activity we've just started—the link of birth in the wheel—allows the sankara to reproduce itself a hundred or a thousandfold. In our gardening analogy, the weed has grown into a bramble thicket and is overrunning the garden. Each flower head scatters seeds into the wind for future turns of the wheel.

Then comes the final link: dukkha. We've eaten the packet of biscuits, and now our teeth are all gummed up with crumbs. We feel a bit sick as well as guilty and out of sorts. The weighing scales looms over us like an enemy. The pleasure is all gone and only the hangover remains.

In the teaching on the sense spheres, the Buddha is asking us to avoid all the hassle of the second half of the wheel by anchoring our attention at the point of sense contact, knowing that our habitual reactions will fetter us to dukkha. Desire for pleasure will fetter us to the biscuit tin or the next rung on the ladder of success and fame. Or it might prompt us to flatter somebody so they will like us, fettering us into an unhealthy relationship.

Aversion also ends up attaching us to what we dislike. This can be hard to believe, but if there's somebody you really don't want to meet, you'll probably spend your whole day looking out in case they're coming. A friend once gave the example of going out into

a garden and only seeing the clematis that needed pruning and tidying, unable to appreciate the beauty of the rest of the garden—her attention fettered to the overgrown clematis.

Once, I took an acute dislike to someone at a meeting. For an hour or more, my mind was tracking them, noticing when they came in and out of the room. I found myself eavesdropping on what they were saying when they were nearby, instead of listening to the conversation in my own group. Effectively, I was yoked to that person.

How do neutral sensations and thought fetter us? It's not that we get hooked on the sight of a grey pavement or the background whisper of wind, but we get hooked on the interpretation—"this isn't relevant"—and the habit of looking for something that will feed our sense of self. So the habit of ignoring the neutral fetters us to the spicy aspects of our sense contacts, running after pleasure and vainly trying to run away from displeasure.

The more often we experience and reflect upon experience to see how our habitual reactions fetter us to dukkha, the more willing we will be to follow the Buddha's advice: to maintain mindfulness at sense contact and the resultant feeling of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, watching out for the danger and pulling ourselves back from the brink again and again.

His advice to know both the internal and external aspects of sense contact is a great help. If we are conscious only of the object—the birdsong, for example—we will easily be drawn outwards into thoughts about birds and miss our habitual reaction driving these thoughts. But if we bring attention to the subjective hearing of the birdsong, our attention is already internal, and we may catch the pleasure and be much more sensitive to the first signs of desire, aversion, or ignoring.

The Buddha stresses that the fetter is separate from our senses and what they perceive. He gives the analogy of two oxen tied together with a yoke. The bondage is not due to either of the oxen, but to the yoke. So when we see something, the fetter is not due to our eyes or to whatever we see, but to the binding power of desire.

This is also important. We can easily get into blaming the situation: "If only there wasn't so much noise, I could be mindful." Or blaming ourselves: "If only I could keep my eyes shut, I wouldn't be so distracted." But neither the noise nor our eyes cause dukkha. We can relax with all our senses open to the world, with its myriad of sights and sounds and smells. It's only the third component—the stirrings of desire, aversion, or the way we shy away from reality in an effort to ignore it—that causes the trouble. The oxen are harmless. It's only the yoke that binds us to dukkha.

As we bring attention to the sense spheres, we learn to recognise the subtle manifestation of reactivity before this sets us off into actions and reactions. Eye movements can be helpful in this regard.

I had an example of this when I was on pilgrimage in India with Bhante and others. For a few days I felt really nauseous following a dose of Delhi belly. Whenever I tried to focus on a menu, my eyes would wince and hop away from the page. Then came a long car journey where I got locked into a stupor. After checking into our new lodgings, the others set off for a meal. I tagged along, my mind still in its dull stupor. I only woke up, so to speak, when I found my eyes darting eagerly over the menu. To my amazement, I realised I had recovered. I recognised the force moving my eyes around the menu as greed. Comparing that to the ways my eyes had previously been hopping away from the menu, I saw in retrospect a subtle hostility, as if the menu was an enemy threatening me.

I often notice greed at this very early stage when I'm eating mindfully. My eyes often rest on something neutral while I'm chewing a mouthful of food, but as I get ready to swallow, my eyes start darting all over my plate, eyeing up the next mouthful. If I notice this, I can uproot this new manifestation of greed before it makes trouble for me.

Once I notice my eyes popping and darting, I have a choice. I can relax and be mindful of the food in my mouth and the feeling of swallowing. Mindfulness has uprooted greed. The wheel has turned as far as eye contact and the resultant feeling of pleasure and whatever little manifestations of greed managed to get my eyes darting all over the plate. But at that point, mindfulness intervened and the wheel didn't get to turn its full cycle to dukkha. If I hadn't been mindful of those little eye movements, I would have gobbled my dinner, only vaguely aware of what I was tasting, and feeling entirely unsatisfied, would have gone back for second helpings if I could get away with it.

We can also learn to discern unskillful sankhara from the way we are listening. On one retreat there was a lot of noise from the kitchen. The teacher noticed that while everyone else complained of the noise, I said it didn't trouble me. I thought it was my superior mindfulness practice, but the teacher knew better. He suggested I really listen carefully to sounds during my next meditation.

As it happened, it was evening and the kitchen was quiet, but a big storm blew up outside and the wind was beating furiously against the house. As I listened, I became aware of tiny wincing reactions in my face at every loud gust. I focused attention on the reaction and felt a fleeting pain before each wince. Then, as I focused on the pain, I

became aware that a thought darted through my mind as the pain ran through my face. To my amazement, the thought was, "I didn't hear that," and a lovely feeling of delight followed.

For a while it was incredibly confusing. My ears were hearing the blasts of wind, but my mind was happily denying this. After a while my mind started to believe my ears instead of its thoughts, and I had to trade the delightful state of denial for a mind that was made nervous and unhappy by the howling wind and rattling windows. I was amazed at the power of denial to create a different reality to the one which is actually presenting. Needless to say, I was horribly upset by the noises in the kitchen next day.

Although this was a painful wake-up call for me, I was also glad to be more in touch with reality. I felt stronger, more mature, better able to look after myself, and had no wish to go back to my cosy state of denial.

Thus, keeping our attention at sense contact lets us see the danger and avoid getting fettered.

It can be quite enjoyable, like playing a game with reality. Our old habits are doing their best to get that yoke around our necks, but we keep dodging and ducking. Every now and then, of course, we will get caught.

Suppose we notice we've been lost in a haze of worries as we walk through a park. We need to make a very determined effort to rouse ourselves from this. We will easily be pulled back into autopilot, as our mind will be alive with worrisome thoughts—a million little hooks all trying to drag us back into the haze. The wheel has the momentum of desire, attachment, and becoming behind it now. It has managed to give birth to lots of worries and to the emotion of anxiety.

Remember our gardening analogy. The weed has grown into a thicket and sown lots of seeds. The gardener needs to chop away at the edges before he can get to the core and uproot it. We need to fortify ourselves with a chop, chop, chop at each new shoot by reminding ourselves of the Dhamma and how necessary it is for us to counter the habitual tendency to live life in the future or past. We draw ourselves into the present by paying attention to the sights and sounds around us and the feeling of anxiety within.

So we're back at sense contact again, and here we can chop away at the thicket, letting each wish to react fizzle itself out. Eventually we will come to the root of the problem—some pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling that we were reacting to. It can be quite a challenge to hold attention steady here. Every fibre in our being wants to

react. But if we hold our ground, we'll see through the compulsion and grow a little wiser as well. Thus, in our future work with the sense spheres, we'll be better equipped to resist the yoke that ties us to dukkha.

In summary then, the teaching on the six sense spheres draws our attention to the link between our inner subjective world and what we normally think of as the outer objective world. Instead of focusing only on the outer world, this teaching draws our attention inwards to detect also the way we are looking at things. We discover that our underlying moods and emotions colour our perceptions of the objective world. In a very real sense, we recognise that there is no clear separation between the inner and outer worlds.

Holding attention on the sense spheres, we notice the first stirrings of desire for what attracts us, aversion to what repels us, and the delusion prompting us to ignore what registers as neutral. Thus we resist the reactivity which sets the latter part of the wheel in motion. We are resisting the temptation towards new illusions of me and mine. We are learning to immerse ourselves in the world without clinging. We are practising the art of freedom.

CHAPTER 24

Spiritual Faculties - read by Fínola O'Síochrú

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

> *This comprehensive talk examines the five spiritual faculties (indriya) as practical strengths that develop from meditation practice and support us through life's challenges. Noirin Sheahan distinguishes these faculties from the seven factors of enlightenment, explaining that while the bojjhaṅga describe skills used during vipassanā, the spiritual faculties—mindfulness (sati), energy (viriya), concentration (samādhi), faith (saddhā), and wisdom (paññā)—represent accumulated capacities we carry into daily life.*
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> *Using a vivid scenario of confronting a frustrating situation at a welfare office, the talk demonstrates how these faculties work together when equanimity, joy, and tranquility are unavailable. Mindfulness allows us to register rage as part of objective reality rather than being consumed by it. Concentration, described through the traditional metaphors of vitakka (applied thought, like a bee hovering) and vicāra (sustained thought, like a bee drinking nectar), focuses our scattered attention. Energy provides the momentum for right effort, helping us swim upstream against conditioned reactions.*
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> *The talk offers profound insights into working with anger skillfully—feeling its raw energy while dropping the thoughts of ill-will, transforming aversion into assertiveness. Wisdom, developed through investigating the three characteristics (anicca, anattā, dukkha), reminds us that acting from anger never helps. Faith (saddhā), translated also as confidence, sustains us when wisdom runs out of answers, providing heartfelt trust in our path even through storms of passion. Together, these faculties transform ordinary encounters into opportunities for spiritual growth.*

For the past few evenings we've been exploring the Brahma Viharas, which describe the ways wisdom is expressed in our relationship with others. Tonight I want to take a step back into our individual psyche and look at the strengths that develop from our practice. These are described as the five spiritual faculties, and they are mindfulness, energy, concentration, faith, and wisdom.

We mentioned these already in relation to the seven factors of enlightenment, and this talk also provides a bit of revision on these factors that develop as we meditate. Remember the wild geese analogy? Mindfulness was in the lead, followed in the slipstream by a calming trio headed up by concentration, then following on were equanimity and tranquility. Pressing ahead on the wide flank were the stimulating factors of energy, investigation, and joy.

The leading trio of mindfulness, concentration, and energy have joined us again in the spiritual faculties. This time they are accompanied by wisdom and faith. The seven factors describe the skills used during Vipassana, while the spiritual faculties describe the strengths built from our meditation practice, which can then be used in daily life or during challenges in meditation when equanimity, joy, and tranquility desert us.

Let's take an example. Suppose you're at the social welfare office to find out why your payment hasn't arrived this month. The person you normally deal with has been transferred, and the newcomer can't find your file. After consulting with others, he shrugs his shoulders and says you'll have to reapply for all your benefits. A button pops inside you and rage boils up. Which of the seven factors will come to your aid in this situation?

Your mind won't be equanimous, tranquil, or joyful, and you won't be investigating the transitory nature of experience. Thus, four of the seven factors of enlightenment are missing. But you can be mindful and focus your full attention on the interaction with the official, while summoning the energy needed to prevent yourself throttling the officer who is smiling innocuously, happy to have ticked off another client from his list. We still have the three leaders in the wild geese: mindfulness, concentration, and energy.

To back these up, you could remind yourself that speaking out of anger never helps. This is your accumulated store of wisdom, calming the storm of passion that's exploding within you. You might also be encouraging yourself that things will work out somehow. This is the faith or confidence that accrues from practice and helps us see the silver lining within the storm clouds. So the spiritual faculties are the benefits that accrue from honing the seven factors of enlightenment.

Here is an analogy. An ice skater would use skills like balance, physical strength, grace, and expressivity while skating. Some of these, like strength and grace for example, will accumulate as personal capacities that are useful in daily life. The skater's off-ice life will also benefit from related offshoots such as physical fitness and the confidence that comes from developing a skill. Just as ice skating requires a very special set of skills and circumstances, the factors of enlightenment describe the skills involved in maintaining the pretty exalted state we achieve in Vipassana. But the accumulated strengths from both activities help us in a very down-to-earth way. Thus the spiritual faculties provide the qualities we need to turn our welfare office encounter—and all aspects of ordinary daily life—into a spiritual practice. They also come to the fore during turgid, unexalted times in formal meditation while we're threading our way through the hindrances.

Let's go through the five spiritual faculties in more detail and look especially at how to apply these during challenges.

Mindfulness describes our capacity to be conscious of present moment experience such as physical sensations, sounds, sights, emotions, and thoughts. Although this capacity is natural, we generally ignore whatever is impacting on our senses and instead follow the dictates of whatever thoughts we concoct in our busy minds. During meditation, we train ourselves to experience life at a simpler level than that engendered by the filter of thoughts and beliefs.

In meditation, we usually start by placing attention on the physical sensations of breathing. Then we might notice the pleasure of relaxing from our usual busyness. Bringing the pleasure center stage, we might see that it has the emotional tone of contentment alongside pleasurable physical sensations associated with relaxation. After a while we may grow sleepy, so we broaden our attention to notice our posture and the sensations that register as we straighten the spine to prevent ourselves falling asleep. In all this we are honing the skill of mindfulness, training our minds to register present experience rather than be ensnared in our mental concoctions.

One strength that builds from this training is a capacity to see through our mental filters in daily life. In our welfare office scenario, the faculty of mindfulness will help us register rage as part of the objective reality of the situation. Without mindfulness the rage would take us over, and our minds would only see reality through its filter. Thus the official would, in our minds, become horrible, lazy, incompetent, and all the other labels rage places upon him. We might suddenly realize that the whole welfare system is unfair, infuriating, stupid, and so on. Our speech and behavior will then follow the habit pattern we've built up to deal with conflict. For some, this will mean banging fists on the counter or bellowing into the ears of the official, giving them a perfect excuse to refuse to deal with this further. For others, it would mean channeling all the emotional energy into assertiveness. For others it could mean a collapse into livid despair as we take the forms home to commence the wearying search for documents, all the time cursing the official and the system and whatever else crosses our path.

With mindfulness we will feel the surge of rage as it surfaces. While all the nasty labels may get stamped on the official and the situation, there is also some objectivity about these. We know that our vision and thoughts are being colored. This gives us some choice in what happens next. For example, we could decide to take a few mindful breaths to help us calm down a bit. If we've done a lot of practice, we'll be able to acknowledge some of the complexity of emotions and feelings being generated. There

may be a physical tension in our face or throat, our eyes may be popping, our brows furrowed, our jaw stiff. There may be the heady buzz that energizes us in conflict situations and a strong sense of self.

To the extent that these are registered consciously, their hold over us is reduced and the ill-will driving our response is tempered.

While the Dhamma doesn't give us any prescription for how to deal with conflicting situations like this, mindfulness allows us to learn our own unique best strategy, to find pathways which transform the energy of anger into assertiveness. Although the ingrained reactionary habit might still be ninety-nine percent in control of the situation, we have that one percent of mindfulness reminding us of anger as part of the objective reality. And even if our behaviour follows its usual route, we will at some stage be able to reflect on the situation and learn some lessons.

Let's now look at the faculty of concentration. This is not the furrowed brow concentration required for school work. It refers to our ability to select out some aspect of experience and rest attention there.

There are two levels of concentration which are of particular interest here. The first describes a mind that is approaching its focus. In meditation we might be encouraging ourselves to focus on the sensations of breathing, aware of lots of other sensations, feelings and the mind state in the background, but centring our attention on the breath. The analogy used to describe this is a bee hovering around a flower, following it back and forth in the breeze, waiting for the right moment to alight. This type of concentration is termed *vitakka*, or applied thought. The word "thought" here does not mean that we think about the sensations of breathing. It means we bring our intelligence and curiosity to bear on these sensations.

At the next level of concentration, termed *vicāra* or sustained thought, the bee has landed and is sucking nectar. This type of concentration is more restful. We're no longer making the effort to keep our mind steady. We're now absorbed in the experience of breathing.

Concentration works hand in hand with mindfulness, giving the mind a specific focus for awareness—for example, the sensations of breathing or walking. These sensations provide a good resting place for the mind during formal meditation and also during quiet moments in daily life. This helps us to let go of the stress that easily builds up during ordinary life.

But in situations where we need to be actively engaged, it's a good habit to be more broadly aware. Very often the external situation we find ourselves in provides sufficient draw for our attention, so concentration happens quite naturally. For example, while we are actually talking to the official in the welfare office, our minds will be quite focused on the exchange, so we don't need to use any noting word or phrase to remind ourselves to be aware of present experience. This is the equivalent of *vicāra* in vipassanā—we are absorbed within the experience and do not need to encourage our minds to focus.

But in idle moments the mind might wander, for example, while waiting in the queue or while the official was searching for a file. Just as in formal meditation, when we wake up and notice we've been wandering, we can simply remind ourselves of what's going on and encourage ourselves to keep coming back to that reality. You could simply focus on sensations, which will have a calming effect. But if you tend to be dreamy, it could help to remind yourself of the job at hand. A broad brush phrase like "welfare office, asking why no benefit received" could be used to marshal your energies for the task ahead. It will need a degree of effort to keep the mind focused. So this is the daily life equivalent of *vitakka*, or applied thought, in vipassanā.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the fact that we mostly don't use a phrase like "welfare office, asking why no benefit received" to help us through our day. This reflects the preference for our minds to drift and autopilot, rather than make conscious decisions and be mindful as we carry out our decisions. In effect, this lets us ignore the underlying motivations for much of our daily lives.

For example, our trip to the welfare office might have followed automatically from annoyance that the usual payment hadn't been received. We will be carrying that annoyance unwittingly into the office and it will probably show up as an edge to our voice as we explain the problem. This is a form of aggression, and in turn the official will react to that, becoming less sympathetic to our case.

Using a noting word in vipassanā sharpens our perceptions and helps us to see things in more detail. Similarly, noting phrases such as "welfare office, asking why no benefit received" will sharpen our perceptions in daily life. This way we will notice the emotional baggage driving us.

This brings us to the third of the spiritual faculties: energy. We'll have noticed the anger driving us to the welfare office. Is that a good enough motive? Hopefully we'll have enough wisdom to say no. To relinquish the anger we need the faculty of energy.

The spiritual faculty of energy is the momentum behind right effort. For spiritual progress, we need to make the effort to undermine unskillful qualities like anger and develop skillful ones like *mettā*. It takes enormous energy to make these changes. An apt metaphor the Buddha gives is that of swimming upstream. We're continually having to work against our ingrained conditioning.

We practise swimming upstream in vipassanā. No matter how often the mind wanders, we refuse to give up. We start again. No matter how sleepy we feel, we resist the temptation to lie down. Each time we make those efforts to start again, to keep the sleepy eyes open, to resist the urge to fidget, we are strengthening our spiritual faculty of energy.

One benefit from all this hard work is that in daily life we will have the energy to undermine old habits—for example, on the way to the welfare office. Seeing the anger driving us is already to undermine it.

Anger may be churning within, making our blood boil, but so long as it's contained within the gaze of awareness, it can't do any harm. We can then choose a skilful motive for our trip—for example, "May I look after myself well in this situation." This lets the whole sorry business become part of our spiritual life. It will help us appreciate any positives in the situation. Our friendly outlook may even touch into the heart of officialdom, motivating them to make a more thorough search for our file. Even if the outcome is exactly the same, we will have undermined our habit of acting out of anger. So the encounter will have been a rich one in terms of our spiritual life.

To recap: the faculty of mindfulness, honed during Vipassana as we bring our minds back again and again to present experience, gives us a degree of objectivity in our daily life. The faculty of concentration gathers our often scattered attention so that instead of jumping all over the place or only vaguely aware of what we're doing, we can focus on each task at hand. As we do so, mindfulness lets our underlying motivations become more apparent. The faculty of energy then comes to the fore, resisting the strong current of unskilfulness, swimming upstream with skilful good wishes. With the three faculties working together, they simplify life and bring out the best in all situations.

The autopilot mind tends to complicate things, building monsters and fairy tales in every idle moment, stoking our underlying and unacknowledged passions, poisoning the attitude with which we approach others. While we're waiting in the queue at the welfare office, annoyance could be prompting grandiose plans of how we would reorganise the system if only we were in charge. If we don't notice this, we'll unwittingly carry our annoyance and disapproval into the encounter with the official. But if we wake up and remind ourselves of our present reality—welfare office, asking why pay-

ment not received—this has the effect of focusing the mind. Thus the energy of anger is transformed into assertiveness and channelled into rightful business. If we can then add a good wish such as "May I look after myself happily," we'll achieve the crowning glory of a positive outlook.

Now let's look at the faculties of faith and wisdom.

Wisdom lets us discern which motivations are helpful and which are unskilful. Wisdom would remind us that acting out of anger doesn't help in that welfare office. We might undervalue such an obvious statement, thinking, "Well, everyone knows that." But if everyone truly knew that, there wouldn't be petty squabbles or gang feuds or murders. It's one thing to know that acting out of anger doesn't help when we're calmly reflecting on life in the comfort of home—well fed, warm, and healthy. It's quite another thing to believe that same fact and act upon it when we're cold and hungry, when someone pushes our buttons, insults us, or assaults us.

Meditation practice opens many avenues for such wisdom. One comes from seeing how much anger hurts us. We learn this when we have the patience to sit still with angry thoughts and open up to the full experience of the emotional storm. Tensions develop in various parts of the body. Our thoughts tighten us into a knot of self-righteousness and blame. We explode into rage or shrink into a livid pot of hatred. Eventually, though, the emotion burns itself out. As it does so, we sense the hurt lurking beneath our anger. That hurt is what really needs acknowledgement. Once we've done so, our thoughts become more rational and we somehow come to terms with the situation. On reflection, we see that the bout of anger had been deepening the hurt within ourselves. It hadn't done anything to help the situation. The more often we sit through anger and feel its raw energy, the less easily are we seduced by its appealing thoughts of vengeance and glorious triumph over our opponents.

One very easy mistake to make is to denounce ourselves for anger and suppress all its energy, persuading ourselves we're not really angry. We need to find the middle way: feeling the anger, acknowledging it, relaxing right into the heart of it, but dropping the thoughts and beliefs it suggests moment after moment, thought after thought. This way we learn to appreciate the raw energy stimulated by aversion—the way it straightens our spine, makes us razor-sharp alert. Dropping the thoughts prompted by ill-will, this raw energy can be channelled into assertiveness. The strong sense of self stimulated by aversion is then free to think friendly thoughts of goodwill and compassion without an unhelpful peppering of hatred or ill-will.

A word about aversion and the wisdom that can be associated with it. Aversion becomes a hindrance when we identify with it, clinging to thoughts like "You're bad, you're wrong," and building up a mental case to justify all this. Our practice with anger, ill-will, resentment, and all the other emotions stimulated by aversion helps us drop the identification. But the basic discernment of an unpleasant situation can still be registered. The difference is that we can now act on this dispassionately.

Going back to the welfare office example, we register the unpleasant implications of our file having been lost—that we won't have any money coming in, the burden of having to find all our documents, write to previous employers, and so on. There's also the disappointment that the system has failed. All of these are valid judgments of the situation. They're a part of the truth that needs to be acknowledged. So aversion, in the sense of recognising an unpleasant feeling or situation, is not a problem. The Buddha himself registered aversion when he first thought about teaching others the way to enlightenment. He reflected that it would simply leave him vexed, because the truth was too subtle for others to understand.

As the story goes, he needed to be persuaded by the god Brahma that some people had but little dust in their eyes and would be able to follow his lead to enlightenment. Realizing there was some point to the undertaking, he could then frame any vexation as worthy within the overall picture. This allowed him to say many years later that when people rejected his teaching, he experienced equanimity. He could register the unwelcome fact that they were rejecting what he held dear and instead choosing dukkha, but could then let them go their own way in peace.

Wisdom allows aversive situations to be known as unfortunate, unpleasant, unwanted—but embraced with equanimity. Wisdom is also what saves us in the welfare office. To the extent that we've taken the truth of dukkha on board, we know that everything is unreliable, that everything and everyone fails sooner or later. We know that reacting against this makes things worse. We know that the way through difficulties is to embrace them fully. So we don't take the situation as a personal insult or loss. We embrace it as a step on our path of enlightenment.

Wisdom accrues from seeing the three characteristics: anicca or transience, anatta or not-self, and dukkha, suffering. Experiencing and reflecting upon the transient, ephemeral nature of all experience, we gradually disentangle ourselves from dukkha. We see how identifying with our feelings and emotions intensifies their power, how the mind concocts stories out of nothing, creates mountains out of molehills. When we see

through the false identity, the once powerful emotion reveals itself as a mass of sensations and feelings without any coherent rationale. What was the point of clinging to all that, we wonder?

The absence of a storyline becomes more appealing than our usual insistence on rehashing our point of view. Something about the quiet spaces between sensations, thoughts, and mind states starts to call our attention. We feel ourselves more and more attracted to that absence of drama. And for its sake, we become increasingly willing to let go of our usual desire for pleasure, for things going my way.

We might not be able to put any words to this wisdom. It's a loosening of the ties that bind us to suffering. It is expressed not so much in words but as a way of interacting with the world. We're more willing to experience life at the level of basic sensation than through the veil of our interpretations and ideas. This loosens the absolutist black-and-white stance we so often adopt in challenging situations. Instead of acting out habitual behavior patterns again and again, we're looking for the escape route, the way back to peace.

Our muscles relax a bit easier in stressful situations. Our emotions become more apparent and thereby less overpowering. As our emotional armor cracks, whispers of thoughts like "it never pays to act out of anger" can be registered. We might find ourselves clinging to the thought for dear life as a storm of rage blasts us with its fury.

Wisdom is what suggests the thought: it never pays to act out of anger. Faith keeps our hearts up as the storm of anger counters with a barrage of objections. "Of course I should be angry. I need to be angry. He'll walk all over me unless I let fly," and so on. Our problem is that we don't know how to make good of the situation. So wisdom has nothing more to offer other than its original suggestion—acting out of anger won't help. When wisdom runs out, faith steps into the breach.

The Pali word for faith is saddhā. This can also be translated as confidence. We're not talking here about blind faith in dogma; we're talking about a heartfelt trust in what inspires our confidence. At the start of our spiritual journey, we place our faith in whatever spark got us going. It may have been something we read, or someone who inspired us to give it a try. It may just have been a hunch, or even desperation—sensing that there must be something other than the world of indulgence, individuality, success and failure.

That initial inspiration or desperation can be very powerful. It gives us the energy to seek out a teacher, a retreat, a meditation group. It gets us started on our spiritual quest. In time, however, the initial brightness fades. The teacher doesn't seem so alluring. Retreats are tough. People in the meditation group start to annoy us. Our disappointment crystallizes as doubt.

Unless we've learned to recognize and work with doubt, we'll give up at this point. We could go off in search of another path, a more inspiring teacher, a more congenial meditation group. But the same pattern of inspiration followed by disappointment will repeat itself until we learn to work through our doubts. As we do so, faith develops. At times, doubt can turn to self-doubt. We think that we're too dim-witted, or too self-centered, or too angry.

And that's why the Dhamma doesn't seem to be making any impact on our lives. Again, the spectre has to be embraced. The certainties—"too dim-witted," "no impact"—need to be examined mindfully as part of our present experience. What other aspects of experience can we notice? Tensions perhaps? Emotions like despair or self-hatred? Can we muster the energy to sit through these? Would it help to talk with a friend or a teacher? All teachers will have come through such trials, and may be able to encourage you to embrace the spectre of self-doubt, trusting that, like all spectres, it will at times dissolve into thin air, leaving you wondering: what was that all about?

As we work our way mindfully through the hindrances, our initial bright faith transforms into a deep, heartfelt confidence in ourselves and in the path we have chosen. Faith and wisdom work hand in hand. Wisdom represents our understanding of the Dhamma. Faith represents our willingness to embrace it. Faith is energising, heartfelt, a joyous movement towards truth. Wisdom discerns the dukkha of clinging and persuades us to let go. Without wisdom, we would cling to faith, become a zealot, insisting on our dogma. Without faith, wisdom gets stuck in detail rather than taking the scary step into the unknown.

When the two are working in tandem, wisdom asks us to choose the middle way, to abandon reactivity and loosen our clutch on habitual patterns. Faith heartens us in this unfamiliar territory, lets us trust that some beneficial way forward will emerge. Thus wisdom and faith, along with the other spiritual faculties of mindfulness, concentration and energy, can steer us through our bout of rage that emerges in the welfare office.

There's no saying how the situation will unfold. After a few seconds of gallant resistance, anger might break through anyhow. Or we might become confused, unable to deal with the situation at all, as the next person in the queue shoves us out of the way.

We might break down and cry. Or we might find something useful to say. No matter what happens, we've made an attempt to break an old habit in a very challenging situation, and that will stand to us greatly in spiritual terms.

I had some strange experiences the first few times I consciously tried to break unskilful communication habits in conflict situations. My natural habit is to withdraw, say nothing, but be privately disgusted with the other person. The first time I found the courage to say something in protest, I ended up speaking nonsense. I couldn't understand what I was saying myself, never mind expecting the other person to make sense of it. I then had to endure my adversary saying, "Calm down, love, let me explain," as he summarily dismissed every basis for my complaint. So that didn't work out too well. But it showed me the magnitude of the task I was facing in learning a new habit of assertiveness.

The next time I tried was when someone was giving me a blast of their anger. Although I felt cowed and wanted to withdraw into a disgusted silence, I knew I should change the pattern, say something to stand up for myself. Again what came out was pure nonsense. It wasn't even an English sentence. After a few seconds I found myself apologising, saying, "I don't know what I'm trying to say." But this time my incoherence had the desired effect. My adversary, probably sensing my distress, calmed down and apologised for his own outburst of anger. We were then able to talk rationally about the problem and come to an amicable agreement.

So we needn't expect our spiritual life to unfold in a dignified way. But somehow our unskilful habits change for the better and we become more able to address life's challenges and appreciate its beauties.

To finish, I'd like to recap the qualities we're developing here on retreat and how these link with the spiritual faculties which we need for everyday life. In vipassanā we are developing the seven factors of enlightenment. The three leading factors of mindfulness, concentration and energy become habits that we can take into our ordinary lives. Mindfulness anchors our attention in reality, saves us from daydreaming or worrying our lives away. Sights, sounds and all our sense data become meaningful experiences in which our busy minds can rest and recuperate. This grounding in reality gives us some objectivity on the baggage we bring into stressful situations and thereby the possibility of letting go. The faculty of concentration focuses our attention on the task at hand, lets us become more effective in our lives rather than scattered and superficial. The faculty of energy gives us the wherewithal to breast the current of unskilful habits and swim upstream with our skilful ones.

The next factors developed in vipassanā are investigation and equanimity. Their benefit shows up within the faculty of wisdom. As we investigate our experience in vipassanā, it sinks in ever deeper that greed, hatred and delusion hurt us in many ways. We bring that wisdom with us into daily life where it persuades us not to act out old habits of suffering. With equanimity, wisdom gets some weight and can steady us through a storm of passion. The thought, "It never pays to act out of anger," is only a fleeting thought. As already mentioned, anger will immediately counter with arguments like, "He'll walk all over me unless I blow my top." We can feel the attraction towards these thoughts, the strong, powerful sense of self they conjure up, the sweet sensations they release in our bodies.

Our certainty that anger doesn't help will be shattered unless equanimity steadies us against anger's counter-revolution.

While wisdom relates mainly to our rational mind, the faculty of faith is based in feeling rather than the intellect. It is a heartfelt confidence in our path. Thus, it relates closely to the final pair in the factors of enlightenment: joy and tranquility.

To the extent that we've developed joy in Vipassana, our hearts will be open to the joy of faith. We will be glad to have a practice we can trust, a path to follow. Joy lifts the spirit, lets us become more confident in ourselves and in our chosen path. It gives momentum to our faith.

The spiritual path leads us toward quiet waters where we're asked to surrender much of what we normally prize—pleasure and stimulation, striving to get on top of things, being noticed, being a success, having a story to tell. We're going against the values of our culture here, and this would really test our faith unless we develop a degree of tranquility in Vipassana. If we can appreciate quiet moments where nothing is achieved, savour the absence of drama, enjoy listening as well as speaking, then our spiritual life can flourish even within the busyness of modern culture.

To let us appreciate the absence of achievement, the absence of excitement, we have the delight of tranquility. This delight strengthens our faith in a life of surrender and renunciation.

May our meditation practice here on retreat strengthen the spiritual faculties, so that every aspect of ordinary daily life becomes part of our path to enlightenment.

CHAPTER 25

Mindfulness of Breathing - Read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · 37 min

> *This dharma talk provides a detailed examination of the mindfulness of breathing exercises found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), the Buddha's foundational discourse on establishing mindfulness. Noirin Sheahan guides practitioners through each exercise: noting long and short breaths, experiencing the whole body while breathing, and tranquilizing bodily formations (kāya-saṅkhāra). The talk offers practical wisdom on how to integrate these specific exercises with standard Mahasi vipassanā practice, emphasizing that the Satipaṭṭhāna exercises serve as occasional challenges to deepen practice rather than replacement methods.*
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> *The teaching addresses the Buddha's simile of the skilled woodturner, illustrating how mindfulness of breath can be approached as a craft requiring patience and devoted practice —while also kindly including the apprentice to acknowledge our inevitable struggles. Sheahan explores the refrain of the sutta, explaining contemplation of the body internally and externally, observing arising and vanishing factors, and the option of bare attention where mindfulness is simply established without agenda.*
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> *Particularly valuable is the talk's emphasis on working skillfully with attachment—to the breath, to achievement, to doing exercises 'correctly.' The instruction to return to simple Mahasi practice whenever strain or confusion arises serves as an antidote to the modern tendency to turn spiritual practice into another arena of achievement. This approach allows practitioners to use the sutta's exercises to tweak understanding while respecting the purification process that unfolds when deep attachments are revealed.*

Tonight I'd like to look at the exercises for mindfulness of breath given in the Satipatthana Sutta.

Satipatthana usually translates as a foundation or support for mindfulness. Joseph Goldstein also suggests the word pasture—a fertile field where attention can safely graze. I like that pastoral image. It suggests a restful approach as an antidote to our habitual striving.

There are four satipatthana: body, feeling, mind, and dhammas. The last one covers the main teachings of the Buddha. The first satipatthana, where mindfulness explores the posture of the body, starts with the breath.

Here's the passage:

Having gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, one sits down. Having folded one's legs crosswise, set the body erect, and established mindfulness in front of one, ever mindful one breathes in, mindful one breathes out.

Breathing in long, one understands "I breathe in long." Or breathing out long, one understands "I breathe out long." Breathing in short, one understands "I breathe in short." Or breathing out short, one understands "I breathe out short."

One trains thus: "I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body." One trains thus: "I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body." One trains thus: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation." One trains thus: "I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation."

Just as a skilled turner or their apprentice, when making a long turn, understands "I make a long turn," or when making a short turn, understands "I make a short turn," so too, breathing in long, one understands "I breathe in long," or breathing out long, one understands "I breathe out long."

And so on for all the following exercises.

The first few sentences clarify that this is formal practice, not simply relaxation or a distraction for a few moments when we've nothing better to do. We're making time in life specifically for this practice, going somewhere secluded and taking care with our sitting posture. The phrase "established mindfulness in front of one" can be taken to mean that we've clarified for ourselves that our job is to be mindful, to attend to present moment experience.

Having done all that, we focus on the experience of breathing. Mindful, one breathes in. Mindful, one breathes out. This is our usual starting point for Vipassana—bringing attention into the body, into the sensations that accompany breathing. When the mind has steadied, the next step in the Mahasi approach is to broaden awareness, allowing attention to rest wherever it is called. To follow the Satipatthana approach, we instead take up one or other of the exercises suggested here.

This could get confusing. Should I be practicing Mahasi or Satipatthana? The same question could be asked of the exercises in any other parts of the Satipatthana Sutta: feeling, mind, dhamma. The Satipatthana exercises are more challenging than normal Mahasi practice. They often show up some unacknowledged attachment, tweak our un-

derstanding. However, we can't push ourselves too far. We have to let any new understanding integrate. We do that by reverting back to our normal Mahasi practice as we work through whatever hindrances have been stirred by the exercise.

My advice, therefore, is to clarify that Mahasi is our basic practice and that we only take up one of these exercises on occasion as a means of tweaking our practice. The moment we feel ourselves straining or getting dull or distracted or confused, we immediately go back to the Mahasi approach, allowing attention to go wherever it is called, letting go of any attempt to follow the Satipatthana exercise.

This is especially important because most of us are influenced by modern culture of individual achievement, and so we turn these Satipatthana exercises into another arena where we have to achieve, become expert. To counteract this, we must be willing to revert to the more straightforward Mahasi approach whenever we feel ourselves coming under pressure, trying to get the exercise right, trying to do things perfectly. We can see all this as purifying our addiction to achievement, and therefore very beneficial.

So please keep that in mind throughout the rest of the talk. Our principal aim is to be mindful without any interference. The Satipatthana exercises are only used when things go quiet and we're feeling the breath anyhow as part of Mahasi practice, and we feel steady enough to give ourselves a challenge, tweak our practice in the right direction.

Having said all that, let's look at the first exercise. When we notice ourselves taking in a long breath, we understand, "I breathe in long." The Buddha doesn't ask us to deliberately take in a long breath. We're breathing naturally. It's only when we notice that the in or out breath is unusually long or short that we reflect in this way.

Attachment to breathing symbolizes attachment to life itself. Without this vital movement we quickly die. When we're breathing with long deep breaths there's often a sense of ease and satisfaction. But attachment can add to this with delight, with pride, with the habit of fantasizing and making great plans on the basis of feeling good. We can't get too carried away with those when we're noting that the breath is longer than usual.

Thus the exercise keeps us grounded in the body, prevents us drifting into a cloud of hazy delight and delusion.

Sometimes a long breath comes from a sigh or yawn that preludes sleepiness. In this case, noting "I breathe in long" or "I breathe out long" helps keep us awake, alert to these signs of drowsiness.

When the breath is shallow and rapid, there is often some negativity behind this. Fear can make for a jerky, uncomfortable breath. Anxiety can make the breath shallow and rapid. Anger might tense the body so that we take short, forced breaths. Often we're so fixated on the thoughts driving the emotion that we hardly notice the breath. Here, we're being asked to deliberately reflect that we're taking short breaths in and out. This takes some attention away from the thought fixation, and might show us underlying aversion, desire, or emotional turmoil.

Note there's no judgment involved in this exercise, no preference that the breath be long rather than short. Our only job is to know when it becomes unusually long or unusually short. The exercise makes us more aware of how emotions affect the breath, grounds attention in the body while the emotion is passing through.

Remember that at any point we can go back to our usual Mahasi practice. We note whatever predominantly calls attention, let the breath go at its own pace. We stop asking ourselves whether it's going in or out, whether it's long or short. Tracking the emotion mindfully is to purify our attachment to breathing, or to doing the exercise properly, or whatever has stirred us up.

The next exercise is described as training, as opposed to our usual approach in Vipassana, which is to be mindful without having any agenda. "One trains thus: I shall breathe in experiencing the full body. I shall breathe out experiencing the full body."

Sometimes "the full body" is interpreted as the full body of the breath. For instance, we track beginning, middle, and end of the breath. Another interpretation is that we have a broad awareness of the full body, with the breath as one component within this. I find the second interpretation more helpful. Instead of focusing closely on the sensations of breathing, we have a more spacious awareness of the body.

It's interesting that this exercise is described as training. The natural tendency is for mindfulness to focus down on one sensation or another. We have to put some effort into maintaining the more spacious approach. The teacher Rob Burbea describes it as blowing up a bubble of mindfulness. Whenever we notice the bubble deflating and attention closing down onto some particular sensation, we very gently blow up that bubble again so that mindfulness encompasses the full body.

The point of this training is to help us develop a more spacious awareness. This can at times be very useful. We can get lost in detail, overly delighted by pleasant feelings for example, or fearful around unpleasant ones. This is no problem when we have enough equanimity to remain mindful and objective despite these strong emotions.

However, when we feel ourselves being overwhelmed by emotion, it can be helpful to broaden awareness. This promotes objectivity and equanimity, lets the emotion burn away without overwhelming us completely.

This exercise—to breathe in experiencing the full body, breathe out experiencing the full body—develops our ability to stand back and see the bigger picture. If we deliberately practice this from time to time, we'll find it creeping naturally into our Vipassana practice when we're being threatened with overwhelm and need to strengthen equanimity.

The next instruction also involves training. "One trains thus: I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. One trains thus: I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation."

The Pali word for formation is sankhara. We're more used to thinking of sankhara in terms of the mind—the habits of mind we develop every time we think, speak, or act. But there are also habits of body. Each of us walks in our own way. Our posture and facial expression are likewise individuated. Every time we frown, our facial muscles get another chance to perfect their ability to frown. Thus our physical makeup is based on habit.

When we tranquilize the bodily formation, we are allowing the breath to calm the body. We might be amazed at how much tension we hold until we consciously try to relax. The face, the jaw, the shoulders, the stomach—all these can hold knots of tension. The habit of tension runs deep. As soon as we relax a muscle, we might notice it's tensing up again. That's why this instruction is also a form of training. We're cultivating a new habit, trying to teach an old dog tricks, and we have to have a lot of patience.

Many people have practical challenges such as financial pressure, ill health, deadlines at work, relationship difficulties. All these can result in physical tension. Even if there are no obvious challenges, we carry stress because of our unenlightened nature.

We keep expecting the world to make us happy. If only we could get away on holiday, get a pay rise, become more confident—surely then we would be happy. But the world cannot satisfy. Life is dukkha, the Buddha proclaims in the First Noble Truth. No job, relationship, or achievement can provide a secure basis for happiness. All of these are unstable, changing, unreliable. To be deluded is to be constantly disappointed.

Retreating into cynicism or hopelessness is no help either. Life has its ups as well as downs. We cannot prevent pleasant feelings from registering. To maintain cynicism, we have to tense up, suppressing the smidgen of joy and hope that follows each pleasant experience.

The exercise of relaxing the body can therefore be challenging. We are asking ourselves to trust that, at least for now, for this meditation session, there is no need to worry. We are in a safe place. We have nothing to achieve apart from remaining mindful.

The instruction links relaxation with the breath: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the body formation. I shall breathe out tranquilizing the body formation." The Vipassana teacher Bhante Sujeeva suggests imagining the breath flowing through whichever part of the body we are relaxing. We could even imagine a wave of breath flowing the full length of the body.

But we cannot force relaxation. If tension gets even tighter as we think about relaxing, then we need to let go of the exercise, return to Mahasi practice, feel the tension as sensations without judging these as wrong. This is to give the underlying emotion the time and space it needs to be acknowledged.

The Buddha gives the simile of a woodturner for our work with the breath: "Just as a skilled turner or their apprentice, when making a long turn, understands, 'I make a long turn,' so too, breathing in long, one understands, 'I breathe in long.'" He is saying that we are to regard breathing as a skill, one that needs devoted practice, an activity we can respect and esteem.

James, one of Bhante's students and a skilled woodworker, sent me a video of a man carving out an ornate chess set using a traditional instrument similar to those used in the Buddha's day. One hand turns a bow which determines how quickly the wood spins. The other hand, or sometimes a foot, holds a blade that cuts into the spinning wood, carving out a pattern. It really is an impressive skill. With a sharp knife in one hand and a delicate bow in another, the turner has to be very alert to what he is doing.

Would it be possible to see the breath in a similar fashion? Long, slow breaths help us relax, gain stability, resource ourselves, while rapid breathing often accompanies emotional release. Rather than preferring one to the other, could we, like the woodturner, learn to see which was appropriate? At times we take long, slow breaths with flow throughout the body. These steady the mind and promote equanimity. At times the breath grows short and rapid as strong tensions emerge along with a storm of emotion. If awareness can track the physical sensations, we feel the underlying emotion more objectively, allowing old fears and grudges to heal. Just as the woodturner carves out a beautiful shape from rough wood, so mindfulness of breath carves out wisdom from raw physical sensations.

We have to be careful that the emphasis on skill doesn't lead to the wrong attitude. We might start getting uptight, putting ourselves under pressure to have the perfect yogic breath or to release all our fears and phobias. But this is to cultivate dukkha. In truth, we are not in control of the breath. Any semblance of control is delusion. It is only when we can surrender, allowing the breath to come and go just as nature intends, that we find ourselves in tune, that the breath follows the pattern we also think is best. Training ourselves to breathe mindfully is a humbling process.

To help ourselves through these times, we can remember that the Buddha's analogy also includes the apprentice: "Just as a skilled woodturner or his apprentice were to make a long turn." The Buddha gives us full permission to be the apprentice, having barely a clue how to get a breath into tight lungs.

Having described these exercises for mindfulness of breath, we then come to what is termed the refrain of the Sutta. The Buddha repeats this refrain after each set of exercises in all four Satipatthana. Here is how it goes for the first Satipatthana, mindfulness of body:

"In this way, he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or else he abides contemplating the body in its arising factors. Or he abides contemplating the body in its vanishing factors. Or he abides contemplating the body in its arising and vanishing factors. Or else mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body."

Contemplating the body as a body internally is what we have been describing so far. We are looking inside, feeling our own sensations.

To contemplate is to think deeply, and it's interesting that this term is used here. We're not actively generating thoughts as we practice, yet the mind that can think is present, part of the watching process. It's taking in information, much as though we were at a lecture or watching a documentary. We might notice that the jaw tenses when we come to the end of the out-breath, for example. Even if this isn't processed into a grammatical sentence, the facts of the matter are now known and will make us more aware of our jaw tensing in daily life. Thus, mindfulness of breath is a form of deep thought, of contemplating the body, seeing how it works, what habits we're following.

To contemplate the body externally is normally interpreted as becoming mindful of other people's bodies. In the case of these breathing exercises, we are to be mindful of others' breathing. This is quite a challenge, but it may be possible to make a start here

on retreat. If another person's breathing is quite loud, we can easily detect when they're breathing in and when they're breathing out. This might also help diminish any irritation that could otherwise develop—after all, at least now they're helping us concentrate.

At times, of course, it could make the irritation even more acute. But again, that's helpful. We often have a false expectation that meditation should be pleasant and peaceful. Noisy breathing can therefore seem an outrage. But of course our expectation is the real problem, and so we have an opportunity to work with the anger or sadness that follows dashed expectations. Going back to the woodturner analogy, we could regard this work as carving our body and mind into a new shape, one that fits in more easily with all the unpleasant stuff life dumps on our plate.

Sometimes the noisy breath goes quiet, just as we're getting interested in it. An alternative would then be to reflect that others breathe in and out just as we ourselves do. Feeling the sensations of breath in our own body, we reflect that those around us are feeling similar sensations. We can take this through all the exercises, reflecting that others breathe in long, breathe out long, and so on. We can, in our imagination, calm their body as they breathe in and out.

This is a form of metta practice. We're taking others into our imagination at quite an intimate level. It can stir a feeling of friendliness and connection, perhaps even confidence, to know that we're not actually so very different from others. It can also show up attachment. We're all deeply attached to the breath—it means life, after all. At some level we're holding to the pleasant feeling associated with being able to breathe, thinking of this as mine. This exercise asks us to imagine the feeling as also being in others. When attachment is showing up, we might feel deeply threatened, like we're being robbed of our own breath and of life itself. If we can bear with whatever emotions surface while we do the exercise, this is an opportunity for us to work with what is possibly the deepest attachment in life.

The refrain then presents the option of contemplating the body in its arising factors. We know the body through physical sensations. No sensation lasts forever. Each one arises at some moment and then passes away. To contemplate the arising factors, we attend to the first moment we become aware of sensations. Tuning into the start of the in-breath is a good way to do this. The body relaxes after the out-breath, and then at some moment the tissues start moving and we feel the abdomen or chest starting to swell. Having detected the first moment of in-breath, it may become apparent that the rest of the breath is also composed of sensations that arise one after the other. We're getting used to the idea of the body as a series of sensations coming into consciousness.

Similarly, we contemplate the body in its vanishing factors when we notice that each of these sensations fades out a moment after it registers. One way to do this is to follow the out-breath till it stops. The chest or abdomen deflates. Sensations grow fainter till eventually no movement is detected, just stillness. Having detected that last sensation fading into stillness, we are more able to see the breath as sensations fading away, one after the other.

Next, the Buddha gives the option to contemplate the body in its arising and vanishing factors. As you can imagine, we are now tracking sensations as both arising and fading. Can we tune into both the start of the in-breath and its end? The start of the out-breath and its end? This can be quite a challenge, as the feeling is so different for starting and ending. It takes quite a degree of equanimity to embrace both.

Like all satipatthana exercises, strong emotions can be stirred. The point of all these exercises, remember, is to help us see through delusion. The exercise is only a means to that end. As soon as we start getting uptight, wanting to see the start or end of the breath more clearly, we need to relax, acknowledge whatever emotions might be building up, and let them blow off steam.

This is the purification process. Any emotions stirred during mindfulness of breathing need to be treated with respect. We've been taking the breath for granted all our lives, and it cuts deep to be shown how little control we actually have over this vital bodily function. We might feel small or stupid not to be able to do something so seemingly simple as feel the breath flowing in and out. But the mind holds tight to symbols, and deep down the breath symbolizes life. At some level we are all aware that there will sometime come a breath that flows out as normal but is not followed by an in-breath. It's not surprising, therefore, that tracking the breath from start to finish can stir all kinds of emotion. When this happens, remember, we abandon the exercise and go back to standard Mahasi practice.

The final option is akin to Mahasi practice. The Buddha phrases it like this: "Or else, mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness, and he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."

We're no longer trying to detect the beginning or end of the breath, nor trying to follow another person's breathing. We're not asked to register whether we're breathing in and out, whether the breath is long or short. It's a more relaxed form of practice. As in Mahasi, we have no agenda. We're not interfering in any way. However, we are to reflect: there is a body. This grounds attention in the body while making the body as a whole the object of meditation.

Just as we're attached to the breath without being aware of this, we can also be attached to the body without being aware of this. The reflection "there is a body" makes us see the body objectively, cuts across our usual habit of taking it for granted, assuming it's ours. At times the objectivity brings up gratitude toward this amazing, warm, sensitive entity that ferries us around, lets us see and hear and taste and speak. At other times we get uncomfortable, want to go back to our habitual assumptions that the body is mine to move around and command at will. Seeing it as something else, something out there in the world, can become confusing or irritating or sad or perhaps frightening. Whenever any strong emotions or feelings are evoked, we recognize these as part of the purification process and return to our normal Mahasi practice, allowing the emotion to develop and express itself, teaching us the Dhamma as it burns itself out.

In summary, the Satipatthana Sutta gives us a number of specific exercises relating to the breath. The first is to steady ourselves with mindfulness of breathing: mindful, one breathes in; mindful, one breathes out. We're also asked to reflect "I breathe in long" or "I breathe out long" when we notice ourselves taking a long, slow breath, and similarly for short breaths.

Two training exercises are described: training ourselves to experience the full body as we breathe in or out, and calming the body as we breathe in or out. The Buddha gives the analogy of the woodturner, indicating that we should respect breathing as a skill. He kindly includes the analogy of the apprentice for those many times when the breath is demonstrating that it is in reality totally outside of our control.

We normally do these exercises internally, examining our own experience. The refrain of the Sutta clarifies that it's equally valid to contemplate the breath of others in the same way. Alternatively, we can examine the transient nature of the breath, noticing that what we actually experience is a series of sensations, each arising and fading away. Finally, we have the option of bare attention, a more relaxed form of practice when we're not doing any of these exercises but reflecting "there is a body" as a means of working on our relationship with the body.

It is that final option of bare attention that is most akin to our usual vipassana practice. In turn, vipassana allows insight to develop. A tennis player will occasionally do special exercises—for example, to strengthen their backhand—but the only way they can benefit from the exercise is by playing tennis. So too, we follow the Satipatthana exercises to develop specific skills, tranquility for example, or the ability to see the broader picture. To reap the benefit, however, we need to relax all effort, return to our main practice of bare attention, being mindful without interfering in any way. Bare attention allows for insight that leads along the path to the end of suffering.

To finish, let's listen to some of the Sutta's opening lines: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the realization of nibbana, namely, the four foundations for mindfulness. Having gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, one sits down. Having folded one's legs crosswise, set the body erect and established mindfulness in front of one. Ever mindful, one breathes in. Mindful, one breathes out."

May our practice enable us to surmount sorrow and lamentation, to realize nibbana.

CHAPTER 26

Destruction of Craving: Tracing Back to the Origin of Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Noirin Sheahan offers a detailed exploration of the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38), the Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving. The teaching begins with the monk Sāti's mistaken view that a single, unchanging consciousness travels through our lives and rebirths—a delusion the Buddha firmly refutes. Sheahan guides practitioners through the Buddha's teaching that consciousness is dependently arisen, comparing it to fire named according to its fuel, and explores how this understanding can be directly investigated in meditation practice.

The talk traces the chain of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda) from craving (taṇhā) back through its supporting conditions: feeling (vedanā), sense contact (phassa), the six sense bases, mind-and-matter (nāma-rūpa), consciousness (viññāṇa), habitual formations (saṅkhārā), and ultimately ignorance (avijjā). Sheahan illuminates the three types of craving—for sense pleasure, for becoming, and for non-becoming—and distinguishes these from skillful desire (chanda). She offers accessible explanations of how the mental and physical components of experience interrelate like an ecosystem rather than a simple linear chain.

Practically, Sheahan encourages meditators to investigate the Buddha's three questions: recognizing that "this has come to be," understanding that experience arises with nutriment, and seeing that phenomena cease when their supporting conditions are removed. She connects this to working with the hindrances, the three personality types rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, and the transformative power of mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati). The talk offers both philosophical depth and immediate relevance for undermining the conditions that perpetuate suffering in daily life.

Tonight I want to look at the teaching known as the Destruction of Craving, the Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta.

The teaching is given because one of the Buddha's monks, Sati, believes that there is just this one consciousness that runs throughout all our life and was with us in our previous lives and will accompany us throughout our future lives. Just this one and no other, he claims, thinking he's teaching the Dhamma correctly and according to the Buddha. The other disciples try to dissuade him, but Sati insists on his view and is summoned by the Buddha to discuss the matter.

The Buddha starts by asking Sati about his one consciousness understanding. When Sati repeats this, the Buddha then asks him to define consciousness. Sati says it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions.

To Sati's dismay, the Buddha dismisses this vehemently, saying, "Misguided man, to whom have you ever heard me explain the Dhamma thus? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us and by your wrong grasp have injured yourself and stored up much demerit."

We are told that on hearing this, poor old Sati sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum and without response.

I'd say we could all have sympathy with Sati. It certainly seems that our essence, call it consciousness, is that which speaks and feels and experiences, and that this essence has been with us all our life. And if we believe in rebirth, it's hard to see what else within us might survive other than that which speaks and feels and experiences the results of good and bad karma. Obviously, we're badly mistaken here—we're suffering from the same delusion that got Sati into trouble.

It is interesting that the Buddha gets Sati to explain his understanding before he so emphatically refutes it. This reflects the fact that we need to be clear about our delusions before we can see through them. We put them forward into the gaze of mindfulness, trusting that this will filter out the falsehood from the truth.

The Buddha then reiterates his own teaching. Firstly, consciousness is of six kinds. For instance, if our eyes are open and there's a visible object in front of them, then eye consciousness can arise. If our hearing works and sound waves fall on the ears, then ear consciousness can arise. He gives the analogy of fire—a log fire, a grass fire. We name the fire depending on what fuel it is based upon.

He then goes on to question the audience on three points. To start with, he asks whether they are clear that "this has come to be." They all chorus in unison, "Yes, Venerable Sir." It is very irritating when we're scratching our heads wondering what on earth he means. But these short, often perplexing statements from the Buddha give us something to investigate in vipassana.

It would be worthwhile, when you next sit in meditation, to ask yourself whether your experience could be described by the phrase "this has come to be." Once our mind settles in meditation, we find ourselves in a sea of sensations and feelings, reactions of

desire or aversion, emotions, thoughts and images. This can be incredibly confusing until we notice that only one of these is happening at any one time. It simplifies things to track each passing experience rather than try to make sense of the totality. Each experience could be labelled as "this."

We might be watching the breath. We feel glad to be watching the breath. What the Buddha is asking of us is to notice that gladness has come to be. After a while, we don't feel so glad anymore. We feel a bit glum, thinking something better should be happening. Again, what's asked of us is to notice that glumness has come to be, that discontent has come to be. In general, whatever takes our attention, we're being asked to notice that this is our present moment experience.

To follow this to a deeper level, if our gaze lands on a green field, eye consciousness gives us an image of greenness. Concentration is rarely sharp enough to see individual moments of consciousness in this way, and so we see the world as a multitude of separate objects which all exist simultaneously—green fields and trees and sky and so on. But when we calm the mind enough to allow moments of deeper clarity, we see that only one sense contact can be registered at a time, for instance greenness, blueness, greyness, and that we're building an overall picture by joining the dots.

While it's an amazing feat of intelligence to be able to join the dots and negotiate the world based on the overall picture we get from this, we also need to see the underlying process. I had a glimpse of this one time as I was eating lunch on retreat. I saw the knife and fork moving slowly toward the potato. My attention was taken by something else for a moment. Then visual consciousness came to the fore again, only this time the knife and fork had moved closer to the potato. I realized I had just seen two visual stills within what I normally interpret as a continuous video of visual consciousness.

Because of mindfulness, I wasn't joining the dots in the usual way. Instead, I knew that in between the two stills, I had no idea where the knife and fork were, or even whether they existed. There was a complete blank and absence of information. For those moments, visual consciousness had ceased.

The Buddha never suggests that the world stops existing when we're not watching it. He doesn't attempt to describe reality in terms of objective science. What he describes is the cognitive process upon which we build our picture of reality.

He wants us to see that our access to the world, our ability to know it consciously, is unstable, conditional. A portal opens, gives us a little snippet of information, then closes. As the Buddha teaches, consciousness arises and then ceases.

Getting a direct experience of this undermines the delusion Sāti describes so succinctly—that there's just one consciousness that sees and feels and experiences the results of good and bad karma, and that this same consciousness has been with us all our lives and will be with us in the next life too. Sāti's description mirrors our delusion, but it doesn't bear scrutiny under the watchful eye of mindfulness.

Seeing this stop-start nature of cognition is not simply academic. It might rock a person to the core of their being to realize how limited is our knowledge of reality. As we learn to live with this uncomfortable news, the insight gradually opens the heart. It helps us loosen our grip on certainties we cling to—entrenched opinions about who and what we are, how we should behave, how others should behave. Knowing how little we actually know makes it easier to forgive mistakes, to be grateful that anything at all can actually work out right in the midst of such a paucity of real information dependent on so many unproven assumptions. We realize how much we're taking for granted and what a miracle it is even to be able to take a footstep or make a cup of tea.

Having ascertained that his disciples understand experience from the viewpoint of present moment awareness—which can be summarized as "this has come to be"—the Buddha then goes on to ask whether they're clear that its origination occurs with that as nutriment. Conscious experience depends on certain conditions. It doesn't arise from nowhere. It needs support, nutriment. All of these nutriments, he declares, have craving as their origin.

Craving is another word for sensual desire, or *taṇhā* in Pali. This, the Buddha had discovered, was the basic drive underlying all worldly experience. It's because we want something from the world that we become conscious of it. That's quite a thought to reflect on.

Now of course the Buddha was conscious and could see and hear and think. He was living within the world of sense contact. So there's obviously a way to experience the world that doesn't depend on craving. The word *taṇhā* comes in three flavors. The desire for sense pleasure is one. Another is the desire to become—to be someone special. And finally, the desire not to become. This is when we want to annihilate ourselves. In the extreme it means suicide, but in minor ways this desire arises out of embarrassment, for example, when we want to become invisible. *Taṇhā*, or craving, refers to all of these three flavors of desire.

There is a related word, *chanda*, which describes skillful desire. *Chanda* also supports consciousness. We see this when we use *chanda* to develop traits like *mettā*, for example. We start spotting opportunities where goodwill is needed. We become more conscious of goodwill in others. It's like we've opened a door into a whole new aspect of life, an area we were previously not conscious of.

The Buddha doesn't describe the workings of an enlightened being, as we don't need to know this before we get there. But my guess is that *chanda* plays a part in maintaining their consciousness within the phenomenal world. But that's an aside.

What the Buddha is keen for us to understand is that within our unenlightened state, all nutriment for conscious experience has craving as its base. Whatever is our present moment experience, this has come to be because we crave sense pleasure, we crave existence—to become someone special—or we crave non-existence, to be invisible.

The third question the Buddha puts to his disciples is whether they are clear that with the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation. Let's say what has come to be is a feeling of happiness. This will have been born from certain conditions—it could have been the thought of a job well done. If we can steady attention on the feeling, the thought will fade, and sometime afterwards the feeling also fades. This shows us that the feeling of happiness needs certain supportive factors.

In fact, everything we experience fades away after a few moments, once the supporting conditions give way. We see this in gross terms. An animal dies without food. A plant dies without water. Snow melts when it gets too warm. Machines break down when they're not maintained. Everything depends on its supporting conditions and fades away, ceases to exist once those conditions fail to appear.

Mostly we hear this as bad news. We dread change and loss. But of course it can be used to suit our purposes. If we want to stop something undesirable, it's usually easier to undermine its supporting conditions than to tackle the problem head on. If a child is crying, we find out what the problem is.

They might be hungry, so we give them something to eat. What we're doing is taking away the cause of their distress, rather than preventing them from crying.

It's the same within us. We might sense anger as a big problem in our lives. Instead of trying to suppress every emotional flare-up, we can look for the causes of anger, work to undermine these. The same applies to any of the hindrances, any unskilful tendencies we find within ourselves. The more we undermine the conditions, the more the unskilfulness loses its grip on us.

This is essentially why the Buddha lists all the factors that support craving. The better we understand these, the more options we find for dismantling the whole structure.

Having set the big picture, the Buddha then goes on to list the chain of factors that support craving. These are the first seven links in the chain known as dependent arising or dependent origination—a twelve-link process that leads from ignorance to dukkha.

The immediate support for craving, its proximate cause, is feeling, vedanā in Pali. We crave to get more pleasant feelings, to get rid of unpleasant ones, to ignore neutral ones.

What underlies feeling, he asks. The answer is sense contact. Feelings are generated only as a result of some snippet of information that has come through the senses. The feeling tells us whether this is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feeling is a biological adaptation which aids survival. Any organism needs to be able to detect threats, to seek out food or other nourishment, to filter out sensory information that's not relevant to survival. So our biology is set up to filter sense contacts into these categories, giving us a feeling tone for each bit of sense data.

The process happens so quickly, so automatically, we're rarely aware of our feelings. We simply react automatically. However, as the Buddha points out, feeling is the proximate cause for craving. And so we need to learn to tune into the feeling tone of experience.

To recap on these three links: craving is based on feeling. When we experience a pleasant feeling, we crave for more of the same. When we experience an unpleasant feeling, we crave to get rid of it. We crave to ignore neutral feeling. In turn, feeling is only generated when a new bit of sensory information is registered by sense contact.

What underlies sense contact? The six sense doors. One of these is forming the portal, allowing that snippet of information to come in. The sensation of warmth requires the body's tactile system as a door to consciousness. A bird song needs the hearing system. The thought of buttered toast needs the mind as a sense door.

When we acknowledge the crucial role of the sense doors, we also see that one way to reduce craving is to withdraw from as much sensory stimulation as possible. We go somewhere quiet, shut the eyes, make the body comfortable. With a bit of luck, the only challenging feelings we have to deal with are those that enter via the doorway of the mind.

What underlies the six sense doors? Mind and matter. Nāma-rūpa. The sense doors are built from the cells, blood, and neurons in our bodies, animated by mental phenomena such as attention and intention. Nāma-rūpa translates literally as name and form. Form refers to the body, the world of matter—blood, bones, neurons. What gives this a name, a meaning, is nāma, the mind.

As an aside, it's generally understood that dependent arising describes how we experience the world. It's not a description of scientific reality, but of our inner cognitive reality. It's also generally understood that the first six of the links, up as far as sense contact, all occur simultaneously. It's not that we become aware of mind and matter, nāma-rūpa, and then become aware of one of the sense bases and then the snippet of data from the outside world. Instead, we become conscious of all of these in the one moment. The usual way to say this is that they all arise simultaneously. We can't separate them in time, but we can examine our experience at any one time and tease out these various strands within the experience.

Curiously, sense contact and feeling are also part of nāma. A simple mechanical understanding of dependent origination would suggest that since nāma supports contact and feeling, it can't also contain them. But the reality in which we live isn't so simple.

Think of an ecosystem. The top predators—let's say owls—depend on there being mice to prey upon. The mice depend on there being seeds to eat. The seeds depend on there being plants to develop them. The plants depend on the soil.

The soil needs the nutriment from owl and mouse droppings to be fertile. The dependence is intertwined rather than linear. Everything depends on everything else. If the owls disappear, the mouse population would explode, eating all the seeds, resulting in famine and devastation. So the owls, in one sense, support themselves—support the system by feeding off it.

In the same way, contact and feeling support themselves because they are part of nāma, the mental component underlying the sense bases. The sound that I'm hearing forms part of the mind that listens. Although the sound vibrations come from, for example, a bird singing, the sound I hear is internal and subjective. It's a purely mental phenomenon, an aspect of the mind that listens. Looked at from the point of view of experience, sound isn't external. It occurs within the mind, within consciousness. Similarly, the evaluation of the sound as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is a mental process. It forms part of the mind that listens to the sound and feels it as pleasant.

While this complexity might seem daunting, we can use it to our advantage. For example, it helps to lessen our sense of separation from the world. If sounds are within me, forming part of my basic mentality, why not try to live more peacefully with them? If they sound pleasant to my ears, it evokes gratitude to reflect that the pleasant feeling is forming part of my mental makeup at this moment, helping me to see the world in a more positive way. If it's the grating noise from a jackhammer that I'm hearing, I'll have more compassion for myself when I reflect that the unpleasant feeling is coursing within me, affecting me at my core. If it's the background hum of the fridge I'm hearing, its evaluation in neutral tones forms part of the quietness in my own mental background. Noticing this invites me to take time off from busyness and spend a few moments in refrigerator-humming meditation.

What I'm saying, basically, is that knowing sense contact and feeling are in here—part of our subjective mental world, as opposed to out there—helps to draw attention inwards, steady the mind on these very sensations and the feelings they evoke. The more we can steady the mind, the more we foster positive qualities like mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, and tranquility. At the same time, we're letting go of our usual urges towards reactivity, restlessness, doubt, and other hindrances.

The Buddha then asks what nāma-rūpa depends on, and answers that consciousness is their proximate cause. Consciousness, viññāṇa in Pali, describes awareness at any one point of the six sense doors. A useful analogy is a mental screen. Consciousness is the screen itself, while sense contact, vedanā, and the other components of mind—such as attention and intention—are the images that appear on the screen.

Imagine you're in a cinema. If the screen suddenly disappeared, you wouldn't see the film. The light from the projector would pass on through, disappear into blackness. Similarly, the ears could be ringing with the vibrations from a rock concert, but because we're fast asleep, the sounds disappear into the vast silence of unconsciousness.

Although in this sutta the Buddha describes consciousness as the condition upon which nāma-rūpa rests, in another sutta the two are described as interdependent. Consciousness depends on nāma-rūpa as much as nāma-rūpa on consciousness. Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, gives the analogy of two sheaves of wheat resting against one another. If you take out one, the other collapses. Likewise for consciousness and nāma-rūpa. The screen of consciousness is needed to play the film of nāma-rūpa. The film contains mental factors like intention and attention, which are needed to beget the screen. You could call it an eco-friendly screen. It only comes into being when there's a film to play. It decomposes instantly when it's not needed.

The Buddha then asks, what is it that underlies consciousness? The answer is saṅkhārā, habitual formations. As the term suggests, these are the habits we develop as we repeat patterns of thought, speech, and behaviour. A river cuts a channel through rock as it rushes from its source to the open sea. Similarly, as ignorance rushes toward dukkha, our thoughts, speech, and actions cut out a saṅkhāra—a channel through which our mental and physical energies can flow. The more often we repeat a pattern of thought, speech, or action, the deeper that channel cuts, making it ever more likely that ignorance will choose that channel in order to flow to dukkha.

Saṅkhārā come in three categories. One relates to the mental formations of perception and feeling. We tend to see and feel the world in habitual ways. For example, we speak of people with a negative disposition, choosing fearful perceptions, detecting hostility in the most innocent remark. This all stems from a saṅkhāra of unpleasant feeling, perceptions of danger.

Others have an optimistic disposition, seeing the best in people and situations. Insofar as this is based on ignorance, what we're looking out for is worldly happiness. We see the best, not because of admiration or appreciation, but because we're used to feeding off the best that the world has to offer. When we walk into a party, we see the drinks counter, the food buffet, the most attractive people. A person with a negative disposition would have seen the messy, half-finished plates of food, heard insincerity in every peal of laughter. The deluded optimist usually manages to get the best out of situations, never noticing the mess they're leaving for others to clear up.

Then there are those who habitually choose neutral feelings and the perceptions of indifference which support neutrality.

When they walk into the room, they see neither the drinks cabinet nor the dirty plates. None of that matters very much. They might sidle into the first group that they encounter, accept whatever food and drink they're offered, play safe in conversation, quickly forgetting the names of whoever they're introduced to. The whole evening leaves only a vague impression on consciousness, makes little or no impact on their lives. Thus, the channel leading from ignorance to dukkha cuts a bit deeper, into the groove of neutrality and indifference.

You might recognise these crude portraits of optimism, pessimism, and indifference as the Buddhist description of the three personality types based on greed, hatred, or delusion. It's interesting to reflect that underlying the will which drives us along roots of greed, hatred, or delusion are habits of feelings and perception.

It gets a bit mysterious here, because sankhārās underlie consciousness and nāma-rūpa, implying that they exist outside the world of mind and matter. Sankhārās are bound up with another somewhat mysterious phenomenon in Buddhism: kamma. Kamma and sankhāra are usually illustrated by analogy to seeds and fruit. Whatever desire we choose to act upon sows a seed of kamma, which will later ripen as a fruit—a sankhāra—which prompts us to fulfill that desire again. While a seed and its fruit are directly linked in a material way, the link between our deeds and the sankhārās that result from them is immaterial. The Buddha warns us that the workings of kamma are beyond human understanding.

Ultimately, kamma and sankhāra lie in the realm of mystery, but one way to picture the link is to say that the doing of any deed results in a potential for its own repetition—a potential which underlies consciousness. We could use the analogy of a ghost. We are haunted by our past actions, speech, and thoughts.

But this isn't just a horror story. Many of these ghosts serve us well on the spiritual path. Thoughts, words, and deeds stemming from wisdom and mettā also want to impress themselves into consciousness and strengthen with each moment of mindfulness.

So far we've been looking at the sankhārā of mental habits—the ghostly image of feelings and perceptions we've developed through favouring certain feelings and perceptions. The optimist favouring pleasant feelings and happy perceptions, the pessimist favouring unpleasant feeling and fearful or hostile perceptions, and so on. Another variety of sankhāra concerns verbal formations: our habits not only of speech but of directed thought and evaluation.

Thoughts reflect how we conceive of the world. They rely on concepts, ideas. A baby doesn't think about what they're going to have for dinner. They just know when they're hungry and whether or not they like what's coming into their mouth. They live in immediate reality—sensations, feelings, impulses of wanting and not wanting, simple perceptions like blueness, warmth, ease, unease.

Gradually perceptions bundle together to reveal patterns. A lot of whiteness with some yellowness at one end turns into warm sweetness on the tongue and a filling of the belly. The concept of a feeding bottle starts to form as a very desirable pattern that is much more likely to happen if I cry loudly. And so we slowly learn how to manipulate the masses of sensory information that impinge on us each moment so as to get more of what makes us feel good and avoid what makes us feel bad.

To manipulate the world like this, we need concepts. We need to stand back from immediate experience and make sense of it. We take a multitude of passing sensations and weave them into a concept: feeding bottle, mummy, blanket. As we grow older, the level of abstraction increases so that we can think about governments, human rights, Buddhism.

All of this mental activity happens when verbal sankhārās underlie consciousness. The ability to abstract, to conceptualize, allows us to make sense of our lives, choose a career, affect the world for good or evil, follow a spiritual path. We obviously don't want to destroy that ability. But we don't want to be enslaved by it either—unable to follow a single breath without spinning off into a stream of thought. We don't want to be forever haunted by the ghosts of our past thoughts, forever rehearsing what we'll say, repeating our opinions about this and that.

We counter this by sitting in meditation, again and again dropping the latest line of thought, choosing instead to let awareness dwell in that more immediate, non-conceptual reality of sensation and feeling. This is to strengthen the habitual formation in the third variety of sankhāra: bodily formations.

These are our physical habits—the way we walk, our facial expression, our nervous twitches. As we sit in meditation, the most predominant habit is the breath. Breathing forms the basis for biological life. When we stop breathing, we die. Of course, other functions like heartbeat are also essential, but the breath is the one under voluntary control. It's a habit we initiate at birth and continually repeat until death.

The Buddha places great emphasis on mindfulness of breathing. It's the first exercise in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. After a rains retreat, when a disciple asks him about his meditation, the Buddha responds that he spent most of the time being mindful of breathing. With three flavours of sankhāra to choose between—verbal formations, mental formations, and bodily formations—the Buddha chose the latter as the basis for consciousness during retreat.

The sankhārā of directed thought would have been unnecessary. He'd long since figured out the Dhamma. He didn't need to reflect on anything. The mental formation of pleasant feeling and perception would have allowed consciousness to establish itself in jhāna, a very restful state of deep concentration. We might think he would choose to spend his retreat in the freedom of nibbāna or one of those sublime states of jhāna.

But no—he deliberately chose to spend the months of the rains retreat being conscious of the in-breath and out-breath. Who knows why?

My guess is that it strengthened his will to live to the ripe old age of eighty. I like to think of him allowing the ghosts of his previous breaths to draw the infinite wisdom of Nibbana into his human form. I'm speculating here. All we know is that the Buddha places great emphasis on the use of this sankhara to build mindfulness of breathing, and that he chose to spend the months of the rains retreat doing this himself. So it's certainly a sankhara that can be used wisely, and perhaps—who knows—is a way to strengthen our life energy, our will to live.

The Buddha then asks what underlies sankhara, and answers that they are born and produced from ignorance. It's only because we don't fully understand how suffering is caused that we let sankharas come out of potential and into consciousness. Ignorance is our basic problem. The Buddha never lists anything else—original sin or whatever—underlying ignorance.

We eradicate ignorance by gaining wisdom. We gain wisdom by experiencing reality directly, not through the filters of conceptual thought. Mindfulness educates us as to the true nature of the world. Each up-close, touchy-feely encounter with experience shows that craving is feeding dissatisfaction, dukkha. The deeper we let this truth sink in, the less we allow our sankhara ghosts to haunt us. We learn to hold off until an inkling of wisdom becomes conscious, cutting out new pathways for our speech, actions and thoughts—pathways that reflect the Dhamma, that take account of the fact that everything is in a constant process of creation and decay.

Having followed the Buddha's analysis of our problem down to its base in ignorance, let's recap. To undermine the delusion that Sati described so well—but which I think we all have to admit to—the Buddha first asks us to drop below the level of conceptual thought and see experience as a series of happenings, a dynamic sequence of events. Secondly, he wants us to see that events are being continually nourished by craving. Ultimately, everything we experience on this side of enlightenment has craving as its source.

The third thing he wants us to clarify is that things die away naturally once the supportive conditions are removed. This is good news. It means that we can put an end to our foolish craving. We don't have to tackle craving head on, stop ourselves desiring this or resisting that. Instead, we can find out what conditions allow craving to come about in the first place. As we undermine these, craving dies out quite naturally. That's the point of teaching us about the chain of conditions underlying craving. The better we get to know these, the more skilled we get at removing the supportive structure within us that binds us to suffering.

If you're looking for a very practical place to start, why not investigate the first point that the Buddha puts to his disciples? When the mind quietens in meditation, ask yourself whether your experience could be described by the phrase: *this has come to be*.

May our practice liberate us from craving and bring us to the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 27

Destruction of Craving: Examining Each Link in the Chain

Noirin Sheahan · 47 min

In this exploration of the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38), Noirin Sheahan guides us through each of the twelve links of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), showing how understanding these stages can undermine craving and lead to liberation from dukkha.

The talk begins with the Buddha's teaching on the six types of consciousness (viññāṇa), then methodically examines each link from avijjā (ignorance) through saṅkhāra (formations), viññāṇa (consciousness), nāma-rūpa (mind-matter), salāyatana (six sense doors), phassa (contact), vedanā (feeling), taṇhā (craving), upādāna (clinging), bhava (becoming), jāti (birth), to jarāmaraṇa (death/suffering). Practical examples illustrate how each stage manifests in daily experience and meditation practice.

Noirin emphasizes that wisdom gained through direct knowledge of any link can halt the cycle at vedanā (feeling), preventing the arising of taṇhā (craving). She explains how mindfulness allows us to recognize these processes and how intuitive awareness can skillfully navigate even unskillful mental formations. The talk concludes with insights into how understanding dependent origination creates a 'tipping point' where the system binding us to suffering begins to collapse, leading toward ultimate liberation.

I want to continue with the discourse on the destruction of craving, the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta*. Here we find the Buddha countering a disciple's view that we have just the one consciousness that speaks, feels and experiences. The Buddha debunks this and reiterates his position that there are six distinct forms of consciousness. When we're seeing something, we have visual consciousness. When we're feeling hot, we have body consciousness and so on. Only one of these can operate at any moment, and it needs certain conditions to be present for that consciousness to arise.

As an aside, I'd like to clarify that the Buddha is talking of worldly consciousness here, termed *viññāṇa* in Pali. There is ongoing debate about how we can describe awareness which transcends the world, *Nibbāna*. Let's not get into that. But remember that when we're speaking of consciousness starting and ending with each sensory experience, we're only referring to ordinary human consciousness here.

The remainder of the sutta gives us a methodology that lets us experience the world in the same way as the Buddha. In the first place, we are to learn to see experience as a series of happenings. The phrase he uses to describe this perspective is "this has come to be." When we get angry we can reflect "anger has come to be." When we cool down and become peaceful we can reflect "peace has come to be." Our whole life can be seen as a series of experiences arising one after the other.

Normally, we use a broad-based understanding to negotiate the world, where we're aware of multiple things: the walls, the furniture, the conversation on the radio, the twinge of pain in the back. This broad understanding requires conceptualisation. It's a cognitive miracle, but it doesn't reflect ultimate reality.

To experience ultimate reality, things as they really are, we have to be prepared to delve beneath thought to let awareness rest on the raw data that is coming through our sense doors moment after moment. With this intuitive awareness, we realise that we can only focus on one thing at a time. Whatever has just come to be, that is all we know. It's the limit of cognition. When we're seeing, we're not hearing. When we're hearing, we're not aware of the twinge in our back.

At times we become painfully aware of how unsatisfactory this is to our normal sense of self, how little the self likes this stop-start world where certainties crumble. The pain of this insight, however, gives us an extra incentive to see how we can reduce the stress, learn to live peacefully with uncertainty, with the inability to control experience.

Having persuaded ourselves that experience can be described as "this has come to be," the Buddha next wants us to learn about the causes and conditions for experience. Essentially, he says, all conditions have craving at their source. It's a sobering thought. Craving is obviously a very powerful force in the universe. Luckily, wisdom is an even stronger force.

So we don't have to tackle craving head on, suppress every urge to want things to be different, accept every misery without reaction. This would be impossible. The Buddha discovered that craving can be undermined and eventually destroyed altogether by learning from direct experience about all the causes and conditions that underlie it. Just knowing these is to reduce and eventually eliminate craving. The power of knowing. It is amazing.

By knowing is meant direct present moment conscious experience. It's because we don't fully know this, we skim over it, ignore so much of it, that we unwittingly allow craving to hold such sway in our lives. To the degree that we're skimming over, ignoring, we are, using Buddha's terminology, ignorant.

In this sutta, the Buddha traces the causes and conditions for craving down to ignorance, this imperfect, imprecise knowing. He then recaps on the sequence, working back up from ignorance to *dukkha*. It's generally accepted that all the links up as far as sense contact occur simultaneously with the remaining ones following sequentially. At the deepest level of concentration we might see the final links from feeling onward to *dukkha* following one another in a flash. So the full sequence may be happening thousands, perhaps millions of times during every second of our lives.

Although our concentration isn't sharp enough to follow each individual link, we can get to know each step when we focus attention. For example, we could focus on craving, looking within experience for pushing or pulling sensations, for rushes of energy, for the mind's tendency to narrow down on what it craves. In time, we'll be able to recognise craving and make a rational decision about whether or not to follow its suggestion.

Similarly, we can learn by bringing attention to any stage in dependent origination. Eventually, intuition will use this knowledge wisely. We'll use that as a theme for the rest of the talk, asking how understanding each stage might release us from suffering.

We get to know the first stage, ignorance, *avijjā*, when we watch our relationship with not knowing, the little question mark in our minds that sometimes becomes evident as we sit in meditation. Not knowing isn't itself due to ignorance. There are real limits to cognition. For example, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. When we're hearing, we're not seeing. Appreciating how little we know is wise. It's the degree to which we're disturbed that gives a measure of our ignorance.

There's a lot of purification to be had by learning to steady the mind around the sense of not knowing, if ever that comes up for you. Bearing with any agitation, restlessness, doubt or whatever hindrance comes up, the mind gradually makes peace with not knowing the future, not even knowing a sensation that passed a moment ago. The pause between breaths is sometimes when the sense of not knowing looms large.

As we learn to steady the mind around that, we also get a sense of there being a potential for something to be brought into consciousness, to become known. This allows us to learn about the next stage in dependent origination, *saṅkhāra*. Focusing on this sense of potential, we sense the somewhat ghostly nature of *saṅkhāra*. All our usual av-

enues for experience are there, but being held back. *Saṅkhāra*, remember, are the habits we've developed through our previous thoughts, speech and actions. They're the fruits of *kamma* and exist as a potential for their own repetition.

What we want to avoid doing is repeating unskillful habits based on greed, hatred or delusion. When ignorance is strong, it's easy to identify with that question mark and fall prey to the hindrance of doubt. Then there might be temptation to rush into something, to choose any old course of action, rather than live with doubt and uncertainty. Better to recognise doubt and learn to dwell more peacefully within that state of wonder and potential. Bringing wisdom to these crucial early steps in the chain allows intuitive awareness to bring forth the most appropriate *saṅkhāra*.

Saṅkhāras take three forms. Mental formations, which reflect our habitual feelings and perceptions. Verbal formations, which reflect our habits of thought and evaluation. And bodily formations, such as the in and out breath, which is the bodily habit we're most aware of in formal meditation.

Let's look at some examples of working skillfully with *saṅkhāra*. As we sit in meditation and things quieten down, during a pause between breaths, the little question mark of wonder might grow strong. We sense the tempting potential to think about what might be happening, what we should do. We also sense thinking being held back, recognised as a form of greed, the greed for understanding and control. In that case, body *saṅkhāra* might be the wise route for conscious experience. Consciousness of breath gets stronger and stronger, steadying the mind against the temptation to indulge thought. Here, intuition has chosen bodily *saṅkhāra* as the basis for conscious experience and our habitual urge to think is undermined.

At other times, feeling and perception may be the most skilful habit to come into consciousness. If the uncertainty has brought up strong aversion, the habit of *mettā* would help us bear with this. If we've been practising *mettā* in the past, then a perception of friendliness with associated pleasant feelings might emerge from nowhere, so to speak, to balance the aversion. In this case, intuition chose the mental habit of *mettā* as the basis for conscious experience. We begin to trust that this strange, uncertain world is, at base, a friendly place.

Verbal *saṅkhāra* can also be the skilful choice, especially when that sense of not knowing brings an almost chaotic bewilderment, as if we're an alien not understanding anything about the world. At such times, I found the phrase "this has come to be" surprisingly calming and consoling. It puts some sort of sensible framework around exper-

ience, reminding me that I'm just a human being in a state of bewilderment. In these cases, intuitive awareness has chosen to work through verbal *saṅkhāra*, allowing the thought "this has come to be" to become conscious.

Saṅkhāra, the habits that emerge because of ignorance, form the basis for the next link, *viññāṇa*, consciousness. To get to know this link, we could try to verify the Buddha's insight that there are six distinct types. For example, while listening to a piece of music, look at some visible object. Can you really hear and see at the same time? Or does one or other tend to predominate? In standing meditation, can you really feel both feet on the floor? Or does attention keep switching from one to the other?

Consciousness is coupled together with the following link, *nāma-rūpa*, mind and matter, like two sheaves of wheat balancing one another. *Rūpa* refers to the matter which, in subjective experience, corresponds to four elements: earth, air, water and fire. *Rūpa*, though physical in origin, is brought into mind through sense contact. Remember the first six links up as far as sense contact occur simultaneously. Here we can see how intertwined are the links of dependent origination. Sense contact forms a component of the mind that allows for sense contact to be made. It's not a neat linear process. It's more like an ecosystem with everything intertwined.

Other constituents of mind include intention and attention. Intention, otherwise called will or volition, is the basis for *kamma*, which we create at a much later stage in the cycle, the stage termed becoming. Intention arises at this early stage, *nāma-rūpa*, and then does its business, so to speak, at the much later stage of becoming. If a *saṅkhāra* of greed underlies consciousness, it is this mental factor of intention which allows greed to be acted out in the world and also be carried forward into the future. It's not the thought, act or speech themselves which create *kamma*. The key is the will with which this has been done. Exactly the same thought, speech or action could have been done out of goodwill, resulting in a *saṅkhāra* of *mettā*, starting a new round of conscious experience in the world.

To incline our lives in the direction of freedom, we need to get to know what our motivations are, pull ourselves away from situations if we find they are unskillful.

Attention is another mental factor which we can learn to use skillfully. We are constantly being bombarded with sensory information. Attention is the mental factor that selects out some portion of this to focus on. When we're not being mindful, we're letting *saṅkhāra*, our old ghosts, tell us what to notice. Greed gets us to look for pleasure. Aversion lures attention towards whatever frightens or irritates us. Delusion persuades us to ignore incoming sense data so that we can prioritise daydreams, worries and plans, all of which bolster the concept of me.

By contrast, mindfulness teaches us to bring attention to what will support our spiritual life. For example, the neutral sensations from the breath, which promote tranquility.

Mind and matter form the necessary basis for the next link, the six sense doors. We have the five physical senses plus the mind itself as another sense door. The eyes are sensitive to light and can act as a doorway for visual consciousness. Similarly for the ears and sound, nose and odours and so on.

Let's look in a bit more detail at the sixth sense, the mind as the doorway for mental consciousness. When we're looking at mind as part of *nāma-rūpa*, we were looking at what you might call central headquarters, the aspects of mind that display and process information via feeling and perception, and control experience through attention and intention. The mind door, on the other hand, represents the receptive aspect of mind. It's the mind as a sensor, sensitive to its own activity, much as the eyes are sensitive to light and the ears to vibration. A detector which detects itself.

When we listen to our own thoughts, we are using the mind as a sense door. It's mind-boggling to think about. No wonder we're in such a state of confusion. The mind can act like an echoing chamber or an infinity mirror, detecting its last thought, reacting in the same way, escalating worries till we're a nervous wreck.

Training ourselves to use the mind door wisely is our pathway to freedom. We can learn to stop echoing information unnecessarily. Stop trying to persuade ourselves that the past is still present. Persuade ourselves that thoughts represent reality. This shows us why so much emphasis is put on awareness at the physical sense doors in Vipassanā. The more often we rest attention on physical sensations, the less chance we're giving the mind to go round in circles, thinking a thought, detecting the feelings and perceptions generated by the thought, reacting to them by generating another thought.

We recognise the value of closing down the echo chamber effect of the mind when we stop rehearsing our woes, going over and over our plans, stop the daft daydreams. It's a relief. At times we detect a deeper silence. We might lose the sense of being an individual, a subjective entity to whom experience is happening. Sensations need no further embellishment, no interpretation beyond the experience of them arising and fading. Gradually we start to trust the Buddha's insight that *dukkha* results from ignorance, from constructing a false version of reality because we are not seeing it clearly.

The sense doors provide the opportunity for the sixth link to be made, sense contact. This happens when a sense door is open and has consciousness at one end and a sense object at the other. We've already mentioned sense contact, which can be confusing till you remember that all the first six links are experienced simultaneously.

At the moment the vibrations fall on the ear, a mental image of sound appears on the screen of consciousness. The vibration is only known as its mental component within *nāma*. The bird may be singing in the tree, but the sound I hear is within my own mind. The thought "there's a bird singing in the tree" is a thought. It's a construction we're putting on reality to explain that sound.

Sense contact forms the necessary basis for the next link, feeling, or *vedanā*. We're hardwired to interpret whatever comes in through the sense doors. Our biology is designed to detect whether the environment is safe or threatening, whether there are opportunities out there we should avail of, like food, shelter, company. Once sense contact is made, the mind processes this to produce a feeling. Comparing this sense input to previous ones, it works out whether to signal pleasure or danger. If a match can be made with a good memory, a pleasant feeling is generated. If it's a bad memory, an unpleasant feeling results. If it matches up with memories that were not in any way special, then a neutral feeling is generated.

Feelings, *vedanā* in Pali, are also part of the mind. They're not out there in the world. They're internal, peculiar to each individual. We easily overlook this. We believe "this person is terrific, beautiful, good fun." What we're doing is to project our internal feelings onto the person, embellishing them, concocting stories based on the good feeling we get when we meet them. But then we feel horribly let down if the person is in a bad humour. Our expectations aren't being met. Perplexed, we might add all manner of daft stories to the unpleasant feeling of disappointment. That they must be ill, that something terrible has happened, that they're rejecting us, that we've done something horrible to deserve a snub.

If we can sensitise ourselves to our feelings, we can stop creating unnecessary stories around these. It helps undermine the reactive stories to let attention rest on feelings, discerning whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, whether they are associated with worldly concerns or with the spiritual life. This is a practice the Buddha specifically recommends.

As we all know, however, this is not so easy. Our habit is to indulge feelings by forming the next link called *taṇhā* in Pali, translated as craving or desire. This, according to the Buddha, is the cause of all our suffering. We crave more of whatever gives us a pleasant feeling. We crave to get rid of unpleasant feelings. We crave to ignore neutral feelings.

Unlike contact and feeling, craving isn't a basic constituent of mind. Contact, feeling and other elements of *nāma* can be likened to atoms of experience. They can't be broken up, explored in more depth. We can be aware of these as entities in themselves, just as sensation, just as feeling tone, just as a mind state. Craving and all the links beyond craving aren't so simple.

Remember, the cycle from ignorance to *dukkha* can happen thousands of times a second, so there is time for a thousand different *saṅkhāras* to underlie a thousand feelings, sensations and perceptions in even one second of craving or clinging. It's like putting atoms together to form molecules, putting molecules together to form a cell, and so on, till we have a new being.

When we're paying close attention, we can start to deconstruct the monster. We'll see that the experience of craving can be analysed down to several moments of sense contact, each with its own feeling tones. Physically craving is often felt as pulling or pushing, lack of force within the body, a strong flow of energy. Mentally, we might sense a willful focusing of mind. We get tunnel vision, all attention being drawn toward what we want or don't want, pushed away from what we want to ignore.

Even though craving is the cause of suffering, we shouldn't repress it in *vipassanā*. We need to get to know the experience. If we find ourselves rushing towards the dining room for dinner, that's a great time to slow down, bring attention inward, feel the mental and physical energies that are compelling you to rush. Often, there will be a mixture of craving and the next link, clinging, at this stage.

Clinging, *upādāna* in Pali, is sometimes called grasping. This generates a sense of self. It's as if many molecules of craving fuse together to create a central headquarters for this new activity, getting what I want, getting rid of what I don't want, ignoring what I deem irrelevant.

Let's look at how we might recognise grasping, *upādāna*, resulting from reacting with desire at the thought of buttered toast. Desire might have been felt as a rush of physical energy when the mind suddenly zoomed into that thought. A second later, those energies have coalesced into an empowered feeling of me. This is grasping. It

might be felt as a solidifying within body and mind. A moment ago, experience may have been nebulous. Now it seems I'm a whole entire person with a very definite agenda.

If we've previously trained ourselves to take an interest in the experience of craving, then *saṅkhāras* of mindfulness could also be underlying consciousness, making us aware of greed. *Saṅkhāras* of restraint could prompt us to think again, to hold back from indulgence. It often seems as though we have multiple selves, all pulling us in different directions. Again, it's important to allow the experience of clinging become fully known within *vipassanā,* rather than suppress this.

Some of these selves we construct are wise. For example, the mindful, restrained aspects of our character can hold us in check while the greedy aspect is yelling for buttered toast. So we can welcome each experience of grasping. These give mindfulness a chance to learn how to grasp onto whatever safety hook might be available in times of trouble.

Every greed will have its moment in the sun. For example, there may come a time when we're curled up in fear and dread of a scary world. At that moment, intuition might well choose a *saṅkhāra* of greed as the wisest basis for conscious experience. We grasp onto anything pleasant. Could be a thought like, there must be something better than this. It's wise to grasp this glimmer of hope with all our might until the spectre of fear has dissipated. With mindfulness, we learn how to grasp wisely till the need to grasp is over.

If we're not being mindful, however, greedy *saṅkhāras* will easily get the upper hand and we're on to the next link. This is termed becoming, *bhava* in Pali. This is the moment when will becomes action. We start moving towards the toaster. What was a possibility, a potential, now becomes reality. It's sensed as a release. All those tensions stirred up by desire and grasping now have somewhere to go. At this moment, we create *kamma*. Acting on *saṅkhāras* of greed strengthens this habit in our character, makes it more likely that greed will haunt us in the future.

It could happen, of course, that we were mindful at the point of grasping, and instead of rushing towards the toaster, we've decided to act on the *saṅkhāra* of restraint. We make a firm decision not to make toast. It's often a good idea to make some physical activity here as well, so that the energies stirred up by the earlier stages have somewhere to go. For example, walking to a window, looking out, whatever will help reinforce the decision. Thoughts also involve will. And so when we make the decision, we also create *kamma*, making it more likely that we'll be able to restrain ourselves in the future.

But if we've been snared by greed, we run to the penultimate link, termed birth. We're making the toast, buttering it, eating it. We now have ten minutes or more where greed can have a field day. We might be daydreaming, worrying, thinking of a thousand different things throughout the process, hardly even noticing the taste of toast when it hits the tongue. Each thought, each mindless body movement sows more *kamma*, getting us ever more hooked on greed, mindlessness, daydreams, worries and restlessness. If greed had prompted the birth of, say, a night in the pub getting drunk, the potential for harm would be even greater.

This penultimate link, birth, sets our life on a certain trajectory which reinforces whatever habit prompts the activity in the first place. But even here, mindfulness might prevail, giving us a chance to limit the damage. We could decide to slow down, to relax and enjoy the treat of buttered toast. You might even decide to forego the last morsel, give it to the birds, as a symbolic step towards restraint. And of course we can take wholesome births, for example, going on retreat. Each step in dependent arising can be used wisely once we know what we're doing.

And keep reminding yourself that the whole process is happening in any moment. So even if, at a gross level, we've taken birth as a toast eater, we can pause at any moment to feel the desires and clinging underlying this. As an aside, let's remember that dependent arising is occurring at many, many levels in life and we've all taken birth in various forms as a parent, a sister, an engineer. We took birth as a human being at our physical birth. All of these births are being acted out moment after moment.

Back to our mini birth as a devourer of buttered toast. Once the last crumb has disappeared, we have the final link in the chain, termed death. The Buddha describes this also as sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. The pleasure is over. All that's left are sticky teeth, a bloated tummy, dirty dishes and the need to buy more bread. The term death sounds melodramatic but as practice deepens we get more sensitive to the miseries we can experience when delusive pleasure comes to an end.

On retreat some years ago I had been looking forward eagerly to the evening meal on my last day. With great relish, I sat down to a bowl of steaming soup. But as the bowl emptied, it was as if my world came to an end. Deep grief, believe it or not. Worldly pleasures don't last. Delusion gets us to ignore that obvious reality. We can pin all our hopes on the next meal, the next party, the next activity. Once they're over, discontent rears its head again, intensified because our latest hopes for happiness have been dashed. We might feel painfully disappointed. Usually, we skip quickly over this final link, busy ourselves with some new activity. But we'll never escape *dukkha* that way.

Don't underestimate the value of mindfulness at this final stage of *dukkha*. If we're willing to feel our disappointment, this is a powerful teacher. In fact, many people start their spiritual journey because of some form of death. It might be a physical death, the loss of a loved one. It might be a relationship breakup, losing our job, failing an exam, seeing the first wrinkles appear. In some way or other, we are suddenly jolted into the more painful realities of life. Not knowing how to cope, we look for wisdom, for some alternative to a life based on temporary pleasures.

So even if we've missed every single cue and ended up with toothache, bellyache and never want to see another slice of toast, it's possible to learn from this *dukkha*. Each and every mini-death we go through mindfully eats away at ignorance, our basic problem. I never again pinned so much hope on an evening meal following that grief-filled bowl of soup.

We undermine ignorance with wisdom. The better we know any of the links in dependent arising, the more wisdom we are gaining. So pick whichever one is most obvious at any time, or whichever naturally attracts your curiosity. The Buddha clarifies that we can halt the process at *vedanā*. We can become completely convinced that reactions of craving only lead to suffering. In tandem, we develop the taste for equanimity and tranquillity, for not allowing ignorance drive us to *dukkha*.

With that, we can resist the allure of pleasant feeling and aversion towards the unpleasant. We don't have to suppress these reactions out of fear or judgment. Instead, we relax, trust wisdom to do the work. When we can dare to trust, intuitive intelligence can start to tease out ways to protect us from repeating the cycle. It can be fascinating to watch how the intuitive intelligence rescues us from our unskillful habits. What I sometimes find is that it uses some other habit to pull me back from the current of danger.

For example, I might be watching anger and on the verge of strong condemnation. Many of the final links can be felt within experience. *Tanhā*, craving, can be felt as a tense pushing within my body and my mind almost splitting in two. Grasping expresses itself as a solid sense of me, the righteous one. There's a feeling of power associated with this image of myself and it's almost as if my body is being shaped as a large fist which is clasping tightly around the mind state. All the earlier links are embedded within the experience too. The sensations of grasping include unpleasant feelings of tension, sweetly pleasant feelings of self-righteousness, the habitual formation of anger and so on.

I teeter on the cusp of the next link becoming. This is sensed as if a dam is about to burst. I know that all my powerful, self-righteous energies could burst through the dam and be released into a torrent of angry thoughts. At times the dam bursts. This feels like a relief and pleasant feelings become more apparent. But because of mindfulness, these pleasant feelings might also get associated with perceptions of friendliness. This can change everything. Self-righteousness cools a bit, remembering the value of friendship. The *saṅkhāra* of doubt might then become conscious, giving me pause for thought.

This, I find, is a really interesting aspect of the whole process. A *saṅkhāra* of doubt is normally unskillful, but can be used skillfully by intuitive awareness in many situations. In this case, it's not arising out of ignorance. Mindfulness is present, and intuition senses doubt as my best route out of the mess I've created. This shows why we need to allow all our various habits be expressed in *vipassanā*. The more we get to know their expression, the more readily they can be used to rescue us from situations. Anger could be a wise route to stabilize us against fear, for example. Greed could help us move on from despair. There is hope, even within all our unskillful habits.

At other times, the transition from craving to equanimity might be quite smooth. In fact, we might not even understand exactly why, but our attitude has changed. One moment we were fretting, doing our best to keep mindfulness afloat, but in constant danger of identifying with thoughts and feelings. The next moment we're okay with the experience. The sensations and feelings are the same, but we're no longer identifying with these, no longer troubled by them.

The teacher, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, puts this down to the complexity of dependent arising. As for an ecosystem or almost any aspect of modern society, the system has feedback loops which, in normal circumstances, positively reinforce the system, making it robust. But complex systems run into trouble when the environment changes. There are tipping points where the system becomes vulnerable. Once the tipping point has been reached, negative feedback starts to predominate and the system starts to fail and can even disintegrate, just as a bridge might suddenly collapse and as the financial system collapsed in 2008. Nowadays, we greatly fear ecosystem collapse. But within the sphere of dependent arising, collapse is welcome. We want to move towards that tipping point where our behaviour starts to change radically, where the whole complex tangle that ensnares us in suffering starts to unravel.

The environment for dependent arising is wisdom. While this is at a low level, while we're ignorant, the system flourishes and binds us tightly into unskillful habits. But mindfulness chips away at ignorance, drives the system towards its tipping point. Once we start to see how dependent arising works, intuition can use our understanding to

undermine the process and bring about the conditions which favour collapse. The system will collapse totally and forever at the moment of enlightenment. But we sense many disintegrations along the way.

I mention these because we should welcome them but the sudden change might leave us perplexed. One example would be the abrupt attitude change from fretful to equanimous. Resistance can suddenly evaporate. At other times we might suddenly see through the fallacy of our thoughts, as if a veil had been lifted from our eyes. We wonder why we hadn't been able to see what was so totally obvious. At other times, it's as if we can feel threads of delusion snapping as we relax. One moment we're blowing up a bubble of thought, the next moment the bubble has burst.

We can welcome all these abrupt changes as evidence that the system that binds us to *dukkha* is starting to crumble. Each moment of mindfulness undermines ignorance, drives the system that bit closer to its tipping point. I hope this talk encourages you to increase your understanding of dependent arising, getting to know whichever of the twelve links seems most apparent, trusting that this knowledge is bringing you closer to the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 28

Two Kinds of Thought - read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

> *This talk offers a detailed examination of the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19), known as 'Two Kinds of Thought' or the Simile of the Cowherd. The teaching presents the Buddha's pre-enlightenment practice of dividing thoughts into two categories: thoughts of sensual desire, ill-will, and cruelty on one side, and thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will, and non-cruelty on the other.*
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> *The speaker explores how to recognize thoughts of sensual desire in daily life—from food and entertainment to the subtle ways attachment can infiltrate even wholesome activities like preparing a birthday celebration. She demonstrates the Buddha's gentle method of working with unwholesome thoughts by reflecting on how they lead to one's own affliction, others' affliction, and obstruction of wisdom. Through personal examples including attachment to a television programme, she illustrates how this contemplative practice interrupts habitual patterns and reveals the stress underlying our attachments.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes the Buddha's striking statement that whatever we frequently think and ponder becomes the inclination of our mind. The cowherd simile provides two practical approaches: during the 'rainy season' of unwholesome thoughts, we must vigilantly prod them with wise reflection; during the 'dry season' of wholesome thoughts, we simply rest in mindful awareness without strain. The talk concludes with the beautiful image of the deer herd, where the Buddha appears as one who removes the decoys of sensual pleasure and reopens the path to true happiness—an image that resonates across contemplative traditions.*

Tonight I'd like to look at one of the Buddha's teachings which addresses something we all enjoy very much: thinking.

The Sutta is called "Two Kinds of Thought," sometimes known as the simile of the cowherd. Here are the opening words:

Because before my enlightenment, when I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva, it occurred to me, suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty. And I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-cruelty.

And as I abided thus, diligent, ardent and resolute, a thought of sensual desire arose in me. I understood thus: this thought of sensual desire has arisen in me. This leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbana.

When I considered, this leads to my own affliction, the thought subsided in me. When I considered, this leads to others' affliction, it subsided in me. When I considered, this leads to the affliction of both, it subsided in me. When I considered, this obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties and leads away from Nibbana, it subsided in me.

He then goes on to say the same about thoughts of ill-will and thoughts of cruelty.

Our first task is to recognise thoughts of sensual desire. These would be prompting us to get more of the pleasures of the five senses and get away from their painful aspects. I'm also going to include the sixth sense of the mind here, as it's a huge area of sense desire—perhaps even more so nowadays than in the Buddha's time, with all our many choices for entertainment.

Let's start with the pleasures and pains of food. Think of how much time, energy, and other resources society pours into the food industry: the agricultural sector itself, distribution, supermarkets, restaurants, bakeries, and numerous other food outlets. On top of that we have cookbooks, restaurant reviews, TV shows, the Great British Bake Off—not to speak of all the advertisement needed to sell each packet of biscuits and each carton of orange juice. Even our pets have to get tasty morsels that have been through huge industrial processing and packaging. With all that activity around us, how can we avoid thinking about food?

But not every thought about food is unwholesome. We need to eat, and there's no harm in thinking about what will be best to eat and what we can afford. Sharing a meal is a way of celebrating, expressing friendship, gratitude, and appreciation. So we can happily devote time and energy to those preparations.

What we need to look out for are thoughts leading towards indulgence. If our thoughts are blowing up a bubble of hedonic pleasure, then they are being driven by sense desire.

Suppose you plan to bake a cake for a birthday celebration. Naturally, you need to think about the relative merits of carrot cake and black forest gâteau and lemon sponge, and which kind of icing will let you put candles on top. Lots and lots of thoughts to keep track of here. Mindfulness lets you detect when the hedonic bubble is starting to form. Some tightness will develop in your body as your system starts to curl itself around pleasant feelings generated by all these lovely thoughts.

Remember, the pleasure is absolutely fine and to be welcomed. Joy is part of the spiritual path, and in this case we have the joy of muditā coming from your friendship with the birthday person and the wish for their continued happiness. The danger, however, is that we forget all about the birthday person and start to insist that we make the best ever birthday cake, with a background assumption of being the best cook or the best friend anyone could ever wish for.

A brief aside here to tie in with the teaching on the floods. What started off as the flood of sensuality in the form of the birthday cake has swept us away into the flood of views, revolving around how to make the best cake, and the flood of becoming, which whirls us into being the best cook and the best friend.

This is one reason it can be hard to identify thoughts of sensual desire. The thought we might notice could be something like, "I have to do this for Mary because she's such a lovely person." Hard to label this as an unwholesome thought. One telltale is the insistence: "I have to do this." If we look a bit deeper, we'll find some stress underlying this, signifying that we're being swept into one or other of the floods.

If we don't notice the flood, it will provide a pleasant bubble of energy to get us through the business of shopping and baking, but at some stage the bubble will burst. Perhaps the cake flops, or the party has to be cancelled, or no one gives us any praise or thanks for all our efforts. Even if everything goes perfectly and we get lots of praise, the party will eventually end. The only thing to sustain our bubble is to search for another birthday and offer to make another cake.

This is an example of the kind of affliction the Buddha asks us to consider, since pleasures cannot ultimately satisfy us. If we succumb to the societal delusion that food is a real source of happiness, then we are on the road to dukkha in one form or another. Overweight, cardiac problems, diabetes, and food fetishes are all associated with this delusion, as well as psychological stress as our persona becomes embroiled in the food business—being the best cook, frequenting only the best restaurants, food anxieties and so on. I know someone who, despite being several thousand euros in debt, insisted on having the most expensive brand of orange juice for his breakfast every morning. What starts as a pleasure turns into addiction.

Going back to the advice from this sutta, we can nip all this in the bud. As we're planning and making the birthday cake, we watch for thoughts with giveaway phrases like "the best," "fantastic," "absolutely must have," and recognize that these stem from sensual desire. The Buddha's advice is simply to repeat, "This thought will lead to my affliction," and see what happens.

It's a gentle approach to working with sense desire. We're not condemning ourselves. We're not making ourselves miserable about the cake and the celebration. We're not quelling joy.

We're just being careful that it doesn't lead to the miseries of addiction.

We can work in the same way with all sensual pleasures—the joy and pride we build from our material possessions, our health, youth, beauty, our relationships, sexual joys, love of music and art. And of course, there are the pleasures of the mind. Most perilous are alcohol and drug addictions, but temptations also come from the numerous forms of entertainment on offer nowadays: books, magazines, newspapers, films, television, internet, as well as the world of ideas and fantasy we can generate within our own minds.

We can get addicted to any of these. On the other hand, we can use them well—to stimulate and broaden our minds, to keep in touch with the world, to see where and how we might contribute to society, for enjoyment, as a way of relaxing, to give ourselves a treat, as a social activity. Too often though, we just switch on the television or check our emails out of boredom or mindless habit rather than with a specific beneficial aim in mind. This is a real danger. The Buddha included idle gossip in his list of wrong speech, and if we're just passing the time with books, internet, or television, this is the modern-day equivalent of idle gossip. We're filling our minds because we don't like them to be empty.

Let's look at an example. While studying this sutta, I'm embarrassed to admit that I was also hooked on a soap opera on Irish television called Fair City. But it made such a good illustration of working with this teaching that I decided to spill the beans. I'm blaming my mother, by the way. She's an avid fan, and to keep her company, I started watching occasionally. But when I was tempted to pre-record all the episodes I would miss while away at Satipanya, I had to admit that sensual desire had overtaken my dutiful daughter role.

During a meditation session, I got distracted into rehashing the plot, hoping Ciarán wouldn't murder Katie. I decided to use this opportunity to follow the Buddha's advice in this sutta, so I said to myself, "This thought will lead to my affliction." My mind gave a kind of "uh-huh" response—a fairly neutral acknowledgement of the suggestion without much reaction one way or another.

I then reflected, "This thought will lead to the affliction of others." At this suggestion, my ears seemed to prick up. It seems my psyche is more worried about causing others a problem than about causing problems for myself. By the way, my psyche has got things

wrong here, according to the Buddha. Deep down, we are most interested in our own happiness, and even though this might sound selfish, it's actually very wise. We can wish that others be happy, and that wish, if sincere, makes us happy. But we can't make anyone else happy. It's only because we get over-attached to friends and family that we believe their happiness is more important than our own. The psychological term is, I believe, codependency—living life to please others. We get over-anxious about them, fuss around them, trying to make things perfect. Hopefully your psyche doesn't suffer in this way, and when you do the experiment, hopefully you will find your ears pricking up for the first phrase: "This thought leads to my affliction."

I then repeated the third phrase: "This thought leads to the affliction of both myself and others." The "uh-huh" response relating to my own affliction now became energized, as if it had been infected by the concern for others' affliction. I could sense myself querying what affliction I might be causing for myself. Rather than dwell on that question, I relaxed and let go, simply noticing the slightly perplexed mind state that had been engendered.

Finally, I moved on to the reflection: "This thought obscures wisdom, causes difficulties, leads away from Nibbana." At this, remorse was stirred. I could see the truth of it. I had started the meditation session ardent and resolute, but had then become completely submerged in the plight of Katie and Ciarán. I could very clearly see this as a loss. I had ruined something quite precious.

From this brief experiment, I could already see the value of this teaching. All three phrases had the effect of interrupting my Fair City narrative. Each phrase had evoked a different response, and I can imagine that the most effective phrase will vary depending on the particular circumstances. The reflection linking my own and others' affliction is not simply a repetition of the earlier two. Some of us may have a wise concern for our own safety but have not transferred this to a concern for others, or vice versa. By combining the thought of self and other, we're letting wisdom flow from the more developed root into the less developed one.

Of the three phrases, it was the third one which rang most true for me in this particular situation. Afterwards, I found myself wanting more clarity on the afflictions caused to myself or others by getting addicted to Fair City. On reflection, I could see that it was starting to shape my day.

What things I'd need to have done before 8pm, what time I should eat. And if anyone called just before 8pm or during the next sacred half hour, my heart would not leap for joy. Basically, the attachment was causing stress, taking priority over more beneficial

activities, getting in the way of friendships. To the extent that we're tied up with any addiction, we devalue our friends and family, as well as our own welfare. The addiction comes first. These come second.

We deepen our addictions with every stray thought that finds delight in whatever it is we're attached to. To clarify this, the Buddha makes this striking and often-quoted statement: "Whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind." Every thought about Ciarán and Katie deepens my attachment to Fair City and increases the power that sensual desire holds over my psyche. Every time we nurse grievances, we strengthen our tendencies toward ill-will. Whenever we delight in thoughts of vengeance, we increase the power of cruelty in our minds. A sobering reflection indeed. We should often remind ourselves of the Buddha's statement: whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.

Now it may well happen that the moment we notice ourselves getting caught up in thoughts about Fair City, birthday cake, or whatever, we immediately judge ourselves for this. By contrast, the Buddha doesn't judge the sense pleasure or judge himself for having thoughts of sense desire. He describes a completely open-minded inquiry. He knew better than to waste time condemning himself. His energies were always clearly directed towards letting go, moving on, inclining towards Nibbāna.

But many of us twenty-first century Westerners easily succumb to self-judgment. If we want to do the experiment recommended by the Buddha, we have to let go of this. But of course, this can't be done by willpower—saying, "Now I want to examine sense-desire objectively, so can I please stop judging this, at least for a few minutes?" Instead, we have to be very patient, letting our attention dwell on the sense of judgment with an open, curious spirit, until, in the gaze of awareness, it starts to dissipate.

Judgment, in my experience, feels oppressive and restricting. Physical energies come downward through the skull, pressing on the forehead and face, causing tension, heaviness, and squeezing sensations. If I relax around all these sensations to any degree, I am then in a better position to try the Buddha's experiment. By then, thoughts about birthday cake or Fair City will have abated, but we can reflect in a more general way: thoughts of sense desire lead to my affliction.

We're not hammering this into ourselves as an absolute truth, remember. We're introducing it to our minds as a thought and seeing what effect it has. A useful image is that of throwing a stone into a pool of water. The stone is the phrase, "Thoughts of sen-

sual desire lead to my affliction." The pool is your mind. The stone disappears and you just watch the ripples. When the ripples subside, we can throw in another stone with the next phrase, and so on for each phrase.

If we repeat this faithfully, whenever we find ourselves thinking about whatever sense pleasure has got us hooked, we're undermining attachment with wisdom. It's a gentle way of working with attachment. We're not beating ourselves up. We're just asking our minds to acknowledge the burden that goes with any attachment. But we do need to be vigilant not to let new thoughts capture us and start blowing up the hedonic bubble again.

The Buddha gives a vivid image for this: "Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the crops thicken, a cowherd would guard his cows by constantly tapping and poking them on this side and that with a stick to check and curb them. Why is that? Because he sees that he could be flogged, imprisoned, fined, or blamed if he lets them stray into the crops. So too I saw in unwholesome states danger, degradation, and defilement."

There are two components to this. Firstly, the vigilance required to keep poking and prodding our unwholesome thoughts. We prod and poke with reflections like, "This leads to my affliction." When we're at leisure, untroubled by sensual desire, we need to reflect on what affliction exactly we're referring to. This is what I was prompted to do after the exercise—to examine my life and see exactly how much stress was being caused by my attachment to Fair City. I had to admit that the attachment was really degrading. Squeezing activities like Dhamma study into the has-to-be-done-before-8pm slot is quite disgraceful when I think about it. I'm well aware of the beneficial effect Dhamma study has on my psyche, whereas the plots in Fair City are rarely uplifting. The more we can clarify for ourselves that sensual desire is indeed a state of danger, degradation, and defilement, the more determined we will be to avoid its superficial attraction.

The exercise is exactly the same with regard to thoughts of ill-will and cruelty. In my own experience, however, it needs more time and patience to get any degree of objectivity on these thoughts, as my judgmental reaction is so much stronger in these areas. For this reason, I find it easier to work with the second half of the Buddha's advice, which involves recognising thoughts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty. Here are his words: "As I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of non-ill-will arose in me. I understood thus..."

This thought of non-ill-will has arisen in me. This does not lead to my affliction, or to others' affliction, or to the affliction of both. It aids wisdom, does not cause difficulty, leads to Nibbāna.

He says the same of thoughts of non-cruelty, as well as the renunciation of sensual desire.

Most of us would think of mettā and compassion as the opposites of ill-will and cruelty, while the concepts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty are unfamiliar. We find it hard to dwell on or value the simple fact of not wishing each other harm. But this links to delusion—the way we obscure our Buddha nature and fail to see the happiness on offer when we rest in simplicity, without desires for this and that. Nibbāna, remember, can be described as "not this, not that," as in this passage from the Udāna:

There is that dimension where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind, neither this world nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon.

Mettā and compassion are the worldly expressions of Nibbāna. They are the enlightened response to samsaric beings like us, who need friendliness and compassion. But the path to mettā and compassion, according to the Buddha, requires first a withdrawal from ill-will and cruelty. We might tend to dismiss that state of withdrawal as somehow unimportant. However, in this sutta, the Buddha tells us that he spent time looking for thoughts associated with non-ill-will and non-cruelty, learning to recognise them, consider their effects on his psyche, and ultimately to value them deeply.

We can sensitise ourselves to these notions in a variation on mettā meditation. Instead of repeating phrases of goodwill, we can repeat a phrase like "no harm" as we think of people in all the usual mettā categories. We can do the same thing for the phrase "no cruelty." Both of these exercises help us to value the fairly neutral states we often experience in meditation or during quiet moments in life. It's easy to overlook these, but when we reflect on their peaceful, non-threatening nature, it deepens our appreciation.

Thoughts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty will arise spontaneously when we're letting go of their opposites, though again it's easy to overlook these in the heat of the moment. Suppose we've gone through a bout of rage and have been gloating over the details of the punishment we're going to dish out. We've gone from rage to cruelty here, but sooner or later a bit of wisdom will return to suggest that we might be straying off the path a tiny bit. There may then be the tendency to shoot straight into self-judgement and writhe in shame because of having succumbed to anger and cruelty. We might even despise ourselves in these moments.

But the Buddha is asking us instead to fish out any thoughts of deciding not to enact all our delicious punishments, to single these out from the rest of the turmoil and look on them with appreciation. At some stage in the transition from rage to self-judgement, there is the decision to stop feeding the rage. This decision may have come with a thought like, "This is getting me nowhere, I'll have to stop." It would be easy to forget that thought as the mind sinks into despair or ricochets into self-judgement.

To sensitise ourselves to such thoughts, we can steady our attention around the feelings associated with them. This will have the added benefit of stemming the proliferation of competing negative thoughts, which may revolve around despair, self-judgement, blame, guilt or shame—and the odd ricochet back to rage. Thus, paying attention to the thread of wholesome thought will effectively contain our negativity, and we might start to feel better about ourselves, more confident that we can learn to work with anger and not let it harm ourselves or others.

So what do thoughts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty actually feel like? I find these very subtle. A quiet withdrawal of energy from that strong sense of self that builds around anger, or its ricochet into self-judgement and shame. The body seems to shrink a fraction during those thoughts, and there is a momentary relaxation, a sense of withdrawing. There is a danger of shrinking further into shame and fear of judgement. But if I can detect the wish to shrink and resist it, the negative energies drain into that midway state of quietness, and a sense of confidence starts to work its way through the shame, strengthening the "no harm" attitude.

In that more stable emotional state, I might find the mental space to repeat the Buddha's suggested phrases. "This thought does not lead to my affliction." This usually increases confidence, adds an element of joy, suggests that despite all my failings, I might be on the right path.

By comparison, the reflection "this thought does not lead to others' affliction" is more challenging for my psyche. I still get the extra boost of confidence and joy, but the desire to collapse into shame also increases as I start to acknowledge the harm I'd been planning for my enemy. The third phrase, "this thought does not lead to the affliction of both," brings more stability and a determination to mend my ways. As mentioned earlier, this contemplation of self and other lets the positive energy from the wiser response support the weaker response.

The final phrase, "this thought aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, leads to Nibbāna," usually deepens my remorse and determination not to indulge anger in future.

We can work in exactly the same way regarding thoughts of renouncing sense desire. Following my acknowledgement of the afflictions brought by worries about Katie and Kieran, I decided not to watch Fair City that evening. It would have been very easy to just nod my head wisely, with a touch of shame for needing to make such a decision. But when I repeated, "This thought does not lead to my affliction," I noticed a pleasant feeling of relief. A touch of pride was added to the relief when I reflected, "This thought does not lead to the affliction of others." A sense of self-care was added to the mix when I reflected, "This thought does not lead to either my own or others' affliction." The final phrase, "This thought aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, leads to Nibbāna," brought a sense of happiness and deepened the commitment to the decision.

With regard to these wise thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will and non-cruelty, the Buddha adds this interesting reflection:

If I think and ponder upon this thought even for a night, even for a day, even for a day and a night, I see nothing to fear from it. But with excessive thinking and pondering, I might tire my body, and when the body is tired, the mind becomes strained, and when the mind is strained, it is far from concentration. So I steadied my mind internally, quieted it, brought it to singleness and concentrated it. Why is that? So my mind should not be strained.

He expands on his simile of the cowherd to clarify this.

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when all the crops have been brought inside the villages, a cowherd would guard his cows while staying at the root of a tree or out in the open, since he only needs to be mindful that the cows are there—so too, there was need only for me to be mindful that wholesome states were there.

In the case of unwholesome thoughts, we are to be like a cowherd in the rainy season, poking at them with a stick to prevent them doing harm. But with wholesome thoughts, we can take it easy, just noticing these without any effort to control or develop them. This, in effect, confirms that our natural, relaxed state is inherently wholesome. We don't need to control, protect, or develop it. All we need do is notice it. It's a very comforting thought.

This also ties in with what we spoke of in the Sutta on the raft. Once we've crossed the flood, we have to let go of the raft. We shouldn't try to cling to wholesome states. We will only tire ourselves out and put our minds under strain. Awareness is not troubled by the unwholesome and does not depend on the wholesome.

Let's recap with an example. Say you decide not to have an extra slice of cake. Don't let this go unacknowledged amidst what might be posing as more righteous thoughts like, "Of course I don't need an extra slice—how could I be so greedy?" These righteous thoughts reflect an overshoot into condemnation. In condemning our desire for cake, we are unwittingly condemning ourselves for having desires, thinking, "I am greedy." But the energy of desire itself can be directed towards the goal of our spiritual life. We don't want to suppress this. We want to use it.

What we need to find is the middle ground where the basic energy of desire is known, and our only job is to check that it's not directed towards false hopes of happiness. Like our cowherd in the rainy season, we poke at it with a stick, saying, "This thought will lead to my affliction"—for as long as thoughts of having more cake are nudging us to pick up a knife and cut that extra slice. When we feel a change of heart and are no longer edging towards the knife, happy to renounce cake, we can relax. Like the cowherd in the dry season, we simply notice the contented state for as long as it lasts. In this way, we direct our instinctive desire for happiness towards its true goal.

The Buddha closes the Sutta with another pastoral simile, which this time gives us a broad brush image for our spiritual life. Here are his words:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, that in a wooded range there was a great low-lying marsh near which a large herd of deer lived. Then a man appeared desiring their ruin, harm, and bondage, and he closed off the safe and good path that led to their happiness, and he opened up a false path, and he put out a decoy and set up a dummy, so that the large herd of deer would later come upon calamity, disaster, and loss. But another man came, desirous of their good, welfare, and protection, and he reopened the safe and good path that led to their happiness. And he closed off the false path, and he removed the decoy and destroyed the dummy, so that the large herd of deer could later come to growth, increase, and fulfilment."

The herd of deer represents living beings, while Māra, the personification of evil in Buddhism, closes off the safe path. The marsh represents sensual pleasure, and sensual desire is the decoy. If your mind likes working with images, try imagining a trail of lush vegetation luring the deer toward the marsh. Ignorance is the dummy. I imagine a scarecrow in the shape of a wolf that blocks off the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to happiness. It is the Buddha who removes the decoy of lush vegetation and destroys the scarewolf, thereby reopening the Eightfold Path.

The parallel here with Christian imagery is striking. In the Christian myth, we have Lucifer, the devil, causing the rift between God and mankind. The rift is then healed by Christ, the Good Shepherd, who cares for us, his flock, and sets up a new covenant between God and mankind.

This image of the deer herd fits very well with the Buddha's teaching on *kalyāṇamittā*, or spiritual friendship. To allow such friendships to form the whole of the spiritual life, we are to see the Buddha as our spiritual friend and develop a loving relationship with him. The simile of the deer herd provides quite a beautiful image we can use for such a devotional practice.

The whole notion of devotion may turn some of you off, but if, like me, you were brought up with the family rosary, this simile could be a very helpful way of integrating your Christian heritage within Buddhist practice. And since two separate religions have come up with such a strikingly similar image for spiritual development, I think there must be something worthwhile here. The Good Shepherd image might not appeal to everyone, as it likens us to a flock of sheep. A deer herd is a bit easier on our sensitivities, and I'm finding this image very useful.

Rather than go through all the phrases on affliction, I sometimes picture the Buddha picking up the lush vegetation that is tempting me to take the wrong path. So far, I still find the notion of Māra quite challenging, though I can see the value of this. It's easy to gloss over the perils of sensual pleasure when we live within a society that actively promotes these. Imagining a leering devil lurking behind the TV during the ads wakes me up to the danger these pose. It focuses the mind to think that someone is really out to get you. Our minds are good at enmity, so we might as well put that talent to a useful purpose.

To balance this, we have the image of the Buddha desiring our welfare and happiness, removing the allure of sensual pleasures with his teaching, destroying the scarewolf of ignorance that blocks our path to happiness. See if you find it helpful to let your imagination play around with the image of the deer herd.

And don't forget the other pastoral image given in this sutta. Like the cowherd in the rainy season, we prod at unskilful thoughts with wise reflections on the danger they pose. When wholesome thoughts appear, we relax, like the cowherd in the dry season, noticing these without tiring ourselves out by pondering them.

Just before closing, I want to remind you of this very striking line from the Sutta.

Whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.

Let's bring that home to ourselves. Whatever we frequently think and ponder upon, that will become the inclination of our mind.

May we develop a wise relationship with thoughts and thereby avoid the alluring swamp of sense pleasure and find the true path to happiness.

CHAPTER 29

Removal of Distracting Thoughts - read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

> *This talk offers a comprehensive examination of the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta (MN 20), which provides five progressive techniques for managing distracting thoughts that arise during concentrated meditation. Unlike the standard non-judgmental approach of Vipassanā practice drawn from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), these methods are specifically designed for situations where the meditator has lost objectivity and become caught in desire, hatred, or delusion despite achieving good concentration (indicated by nimitta or meditation signs).*
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> *The five methods progress in intensity: first, redirecting attention to wholesome thoughts such as mettā or contemplation of teachers; second, examining the danger of unwholesome thoughts with strong condemnation; third, forgetting the thoughts by diverting attention to calming objects; fourth, investigating the underlying thought formations with patient inquiry; and finally, forceful suppression when gentler methods fail. The teacher illustrates each method through personal experience of working with 'vanity' (māna) - the subtle identification with consciousness as 'the one who knows' - demonstrating how attachment to even refined meditative states creates suffering.*
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> *Particularly valuable is the discussion of how deeper concentration naturally surfaces underlying mental troubles that remain hidden during ordinary life, reframing the emergence of negativity during meditation as a sign of progress rather than failure. The talk also explores the relationship between the five khandhas and self-view, especially attachment to consciousness (viññāṇa), and offers practical guidance for the patient, compassionate inner inquiry needed to release identification with any mental state.*

Tonight's talk is based on the Sutta entitled The Removal of Distracting Thoughts, which, I'm sure you'll agree, sounds like a very attractive proposition.

Last night's Sutta on the different ways of dealing with skilful and unskilful thoughts is particularly suited to practice in everyday life and to wise reflection, where we can examine our thoughts on certain matters. Tonight's talk relates to distractions that occur during deep meditation. It offers a broad range of suggestions which include metta, wise reflection, calming and investigation. It also includes suppression, which might be a surprise given the very open-minded, non-judgmental stance we associate with Vipassana. Obviously there is a time for everything.

Here are the Buddha's opening words: "When a bhikkhu is pursuing the higher mind, from time to time he should give attention to five signs."

Note that these instructions are only to be followed from time to time. Normally we should follow the standard Vipassana instructions we receive from the Satipatthana Sutta. Only from time to time are we to use the alternative discussed tonight. The Buddha doesn't outline which circumstances warrant the new approach.

While writing this talk, I used this alternative when my mind became too unbalanced for Vipassana, and I offer my efforts to follow this teaching as an example. After a tantalizing glimpse of a very still mind that simply knew experience, I made the mistake of thinking, "This is the real me." The Buddhist word for this is vanity, which means that we've succumbed to the delusion of self. We cling to what we like in our experience, believing this is the real me.

When I fall prey to vanity, I get overly energetic, striving, delighted with my role as the observer who knows experience and investigates the Dhamma. Ironically, this means that I've lost all objectivity. Energetically, it felt as though my head was trying to lift off my body, shooting skywards like a rocket towards a very enticing brightness. I recognised this as vanity, but the attachment was so deep that I couldn't get any objectivity on the experience, and I felt stuck.

This is where the advice given in this Sutta was extremely useful. Gradually, the skyrocketing, deluded mind was drawn back down to earth. In cases where your mind has become focused but you keep getting stuck in some experience, unable to remain objective, this may be the right time to try out the instructions from this sutta.

The Buddha then says, "When a Bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign," and goes on to give us advice. But first, what kind of signs is he talking about? The Pali word is nimitta, and is used mainly in connection with Samatha meditation, which calms the mind. The nimitta are signs that we have a good level of concentration. The mind becomes riveted by present experience and often you notice something unusual. Though it can appear at any of the sense doors, the most common nimitta are tactile or visual. You might feel a stream of tingling sensations, for example, or see a pattern of light.

The trouble comes when we become sure there must be some deep message in this strange light or tickling feeling. Instead of being just another unsatisfactory phenomenon that comes and goes, we start to believe that it signals some exalted state of mind or supreme wisdom that we can achieve. That was what was happening when my mind got locked into vanity, as described earlier, believing I'd somehow found the real me, the perfect, clear-minded, objective observer.

Before going on to look at the Buddha's advice, I want to draw attention to another phrase in this opening sentence: "When a Bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion."

The sign, remember, signifies a concentrated mind. So the Buddha is saying that evil, unwholesome thoughts can arise because of the sign that we've achieved a concentrated mind. At first sight this seems strange. Surely we concentrate our minds as part of the effort to let go of evil, unwholesome thought. Why on earth undertake a practice that actually causes these to arise?

As our minds become still and focused, underlying troubles show up. We learn the Dhamma as we navigate through these painful states which get covered over by busyness, sense pleasure and other distractions in daily life. This is the path of purification. We easily forget this and believe we're not practicing correctly when negativity shows up while we meditate. It's comforting to reflect that the Buddha expects such negativity to emerge as a natural consequence of good concentration. We can take it as a signal that we're moving deeper within.

How are we to work with this deeper layer of negativity? Let's look at the Buddha's advice: "When a bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then he should give attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome."

Normally in Vipassana, when we notice we've been distracted by a thought, we simply note this and center attention on the emotions and feelings associated with that thought. Our approach is non-judgmental. It doesn't matter whether the thought is skillful or unskillful. However, this Sutta offers five alternatives to the standard approach, and judgment plays a role right from the start.

In my state of deluded vanity, I was having thoughts like, "This is it, I've got it now," or "Oh no, it's gone again." Although I found it hard to consider these thoughts as evil, because I wasn't actually wishing anyone harm, I knew from long and painful experience how much suffering there is for me in this state of delusion. I am identifying with a mind state that is experienced as beautiful and trying to hang on to it. This only brings suffering and deepens delusion, so it is definitely unwholesome.

What are the wholesome signs to which I should attend in these circumstances? In the commentary on this Sutta by Buddhaghosa, he suggests that metta may be used as the alternative focus when we have been caught by hatred, while the unattractive aspect of the body is the appropriate focus when we've been caught by lust.

In the case of delusion, which was my concern, he recommends such things as living with a teacher, reading Dhamma books, and asking questions about the Dhamma. However, these suggestions don't fit easily into a meditation session, so I used a simple alternative: I imagined myself bowing to the Buddha, to Bhante, and to any teacher who came to mind. At times, I imagined myself reading a Dhamma book. All these imaginings had the effect of quelling vanity to some extent, helping me come to terms with the fact that I cannot own all the goodness and wisdom in the world.

Do you remember the Sutta on the raft and the need to sink the raft once we reach the far shore? This is essentially what I was doing. The objective observer had become my raft, steadying my mind in Vipassana, helping me through many emotional ups and downs. Now it was time to let go of that raft, to experience the truth of anatta at a deeper level, where sensations and feelings are known but there is no sense of a person watching them.

When I'm going through a bout of vanity, I'm identifying as the person who watches experience. This showed me my attachment to the fifth khandha: consciousness. I want to be the conscious person that detects experience. Bowing helps me surrender my hold on consciousness. Not that I go unconscious—sensations and feelings arise, slip by, and pass away gracefully. The body continues to function as normal, but the mind's usual habit of clinging disappears. And when that goes, I lose the sense of a "me" who is at the centre of experience, receiving it all. There are only sensations and feelings.

To my surprise, I find that the absence of central headquarters makes absolutely no difference. In fact, everything runs much more smoothly. With each imaginary bow, I got a few seconds where the mind let go of vanity and slipped into the beauty of anatta. In the Buddha's words: "With the abandoning of these thoughts connected to desire, hatred and delusion, his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

As an analogy for what we're doing, the Buddha paints the picture of a skilled carpenter knocking out a coarse peg by means of a fine one. The coarse peg represents our unwholesome thoughts. To drive these out, we insert the appropriate wholesome thought, which in my case was the thought of bowing to some greater wisdom.

However, after several imaginary bows, my mind refused to cooperate, reattaching itself stubbornly to vanity, determined to experience life within its normal, me-centred map. So I moved on to the second of the Buddha's suggestions:

"If, while he is giving attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome, there still arise in him thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then he should examine the danger in these thoughts thus: These thoughts are unwholesome, they are reprehensible, they result in suffering."

This is similar to the advice given in last night's Sutta, though the wording here is less nuanced and more severe. Instead of "affliction" we have "unwholesome" and "reprehensible." Likewise, the analogy the Buddha uses is dark:

"Just as a man or woman, young, youthful and fond of ornaments, would be horrified, humiliated and disgusted if the carcass of a snake or dog or a human being were hung around his or her neck, so too, when a bhikkhu examines the danger in those thoughts, his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

We are to develop horror for unwholesome thoughts of the kind we would feel if a rotting carcass were slung around our necks. This is a far cry from the non-judgmental approach we adopt in standard Vipassana. Obviously there is a time to be open-minded and a time to be judicious, even severe. In standard Vipassana we maintain objectivity so thoughts of hatred, greed, and delusion can do us no harm. But in the kind of situations the Buddha is addressing here, we're getting caught up in our emotions, no longer objective. This is when we put our judgmental nature to good use. We give it full throttle to drive out the desire, hatred, and delusion that are showing up as we meditate.

However, this is not an exercise in self-hatred. What we're condemning are thoughts of greed, hatred, and delusion—comparing them to a carcass being hung around our necks. We're not condemning ourselves. In fact, we're protecting ourselves against these thoughts. So it's an exercise in self-care.

When I thought about my delusive thoughts of being the one who knows all, with this image of a carcass hanging around my neck, it brought on shame for the thoughts and a determination not to keep getting caught up in them. My attention was still riveted on the bright light and that very still, concentrated mind state that I find so attractive. But with the image of a carcass around my neck as a protector, the meditation proceeded in a more balanced way. Whenever desire sprang up, it was quelled by shame as the carcass loomed large in my imagination. Thus I could remain objective.

In this precarious balance, I could feel the grief of not being able to fully know and possess that beautiful state. I could also sense the grief as healing, undermining attachment to the very enticing prospect of being the objective observer of my life. Thus I could see the wisdom of the Buddha's harsh, judgmental words and image. These are needed to balance the very strong desires, aversions, and delusions that emerge when we delve deeply into our experience. When we can't maintain the balance needed to acknowledge these and let them burn out using the standard approach, we can throw an imaginary carcass around our necks as extra ballast.

But after some time, the image of the carcass began to wane and I felt myself slipping back into vanity. I then tried the next of the Buddha's suggestions, which is to simply forget the unwholesome thoughts and give them no attention. He gives the analogy of someone with good eyesight who, not wanting to see a disturbing sight, either shuts his eyes or looks away. One way we can put this suggestion into practice is by placing attention on calming parts of the body, such as the hands and feet. These don't store emotion the way the trunk and face often do. What we're doing is diverting our attention from whatever is causing disturbance.

In the commentaries, Buddhaghosa suggests placing attention on very mundane things, such as going through the contents of a mending box, picking up the needle and saying, "this is the needle," then picking up the thread and saying, "this is the thread," and so on. A variation on this which Bhante suggested to me a few years ago, and which is more practical during a meditation session, is to open the eyes and deliberately look at objects in the room, saying, "this is the window, this is the plant, this is the Buddha rupa," and so on. I keep looking at any one of these for as long as they hold attention, naming them again and again.

It sounds foolish to be staring at objects like this, reminding ourselves what is a plant and what is a window, as if we were in kindergarten. But the mind can get, in some senses, blown apart when we go deep into experience in vipassana. We're learning a completely new way of looking at the world without the delusion of a central control mechanism at its core. This is deeply disturbing to our psyche, and so these very strong urges towards desire, hatred, and delusion can be generated as a defense mechanism. In such a condition we have to take extraordinary care of ourselves. Recognizing and naming mundane objects is simply another way of caring for and soothing an inflamed mind.

When we're coming to terms with our misunderstanding about the world at its deepest level, it is very comforting to remember that we can still recognize familiar things. So don't resist the notion of being back in kindergarten. It's a good place for a confused or overexcited toddler, which is sometimes the level to which our minds descend in the challenge of vipassana.

We've gone through three suggestions so far. First, we use wholesome thoughts like metta to combat hatred, unattractiveness to combat lust, or bowing as an antidote to delusion. If that doesn't still the mind, we up the ante by strongly condemning the unwholesome thoughts and conjuring an image of a carcass being slung around our necks. If the mind is still veering towards desire, hatred, or delusion, we try to forget our thoughts by diverting our attention. This could mean focusing on calming parts of the body or finding external objects at which to look while we name them mentally.

After giving each suggestion, the Buddha then repeats the hoped-for outcome: his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. However, we still have two more options if we're still too unbalanced for vipassana.

The Buddha continues: "If, while he is trying to forget these thoughts and is not giving attention to them, there still arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then he should give attention to stilling the thought formation of those thoughts."

He gives this analogy. Just as a man walking fast might consider, "Why am I walking fast? What if I walk slowly?" And he would walk slowly. Then he might consider, "Why am I walking slowly? What if I stand still?" And he would stand still. Then he might consider, "Why am I standing? What if I sit?" And he would sit down. Then he might consider, "Why am I sitting? What if I lie down?" And he would lie down.

Note the phrasing of the first part of the question as "why." In vipassana, we investigate using "what"—for example, what is it that I'm actually experiencing? What happens if I relax? We don't ask why, as that gets the mind spinning, trying to think our way out of suffering. But in this variation of the usual guidance, we are allowing the cognitive mind some room for maneuver. We're looking for the thought formations, meaning the underlying thought or belief prompting desire, hatred, and delusion.

The Buddha's "why" question is coupled with the suggestion to relax; there's an attempt to soothe the mind. So the "why" could perhaps be interpreted as "why am I bothering?" Although we're listening to our story, we're also trying to talk ourselves out of the frenzy it is spinning us into.

Buddhaghosa gives another analogy which helps us see how to still our thought formations. A hare is sleeping beneath a tree when a large piece of fruit falls out of the tree and hits the ground beside his head. The hare hears the loud thump, feels the vibration, and concludes that the earth is being destroyed. In a blind panic, he starts running. When other animals see the hare bolting, they also start running away in a panic. And so the commotion grows until the Bodhisatta—meaning the Buddha in one of his previous lives, this time as a lion—sees all the animals running across the plains.

Instead of joining them, he decides to get to the bottom of the matter. So he asks each of the animals in turn why they are running. He starts with the largest animal, the elephant, and gradually works his way back to the hare, who tells him of the noise and vibration that woke him from sleep. The lion then asks the hare to take him back to his resting spot under the tree. The lion sees the piece of fallen fruit and realizes that this is what had caused all the commotion. Thus the Bodhisatta was able to comfort the hare and all the animals and tell them there is nothing to fear.

Both analogies paint a picture of a very patient process. The lion had to question several animals before he got to the bottom of the hullabaloo.

Similarly, the man described by the Buddha slows himself down in several stages. So too, we need to be very patient with ourselves as we talk ourselves out of whatever rut the mind is steering us into. My mind can suggest all kinds of reasons why it needs to continue along its dead end, and each one seems like an absolute truth at the time. When I eventually see through the delusion, it feels like a major breakthrough, and I'll never be the same person again. But afterwards, I can rarely remember any details.

It's like an argument with our nearest and dearest. We get stuck fast to our point of view, appalled that they could dare to think otherwise. But when it's all over, we can hardly remember what the row was about.

I persuaded myself to relax for long enough to get my mind around the Buddha's advice. What emerged was the question: Why try to grasp? Why not let go? This quieted my mind for a while as it contemplated the suggestion. But then an underlying fear showed up. I discovered I was very afraid of what would become of me if I lost that lofty glimpse of purity.

Having acknowledged this, another question was framed: Why be afraid? Why not trust? Again, the mind relaxed, considering the suggestion. This had the effect of bringing me more in contact with the fear. As my body sensed all the unpleasant sensations, my mind saw a horrid image of myself as completely worthless—the polar opposite of

the ideal state I had been trying to catch hold of. Although I was ninety percent identified with this state of worthlessness, I was just about able to remember that this was a trance, a free-floating experience, not my real self.

When I could relax to the degree needed to frame another question, what emerged was a reiteration of the previous one: Why be afraid? Why not trust? After a few moments' consideration, the mind relaxed more deeply into the unwanted state, and shame became the predominant emotion. Acknowledging shame brought a degree of relief, and with that I could also sense the caring nature of the investigating strand in my mind. After a while it felt okay to ask: Why be ashamed? Why not let it go?

After some time pondering this, my mind confessed the kernel of its fear: because I don't know what will happen next.

This, I believe, was the thought formation at the basis of all the commotion. This is a big dilemma for our self, that delusion of being a separate unit from the rest of the world. It needs to be in control, to be able to predict what's coming down the line. It's the foreman in the factory, the headmaster in the school. As far as the boss is concerned, he or she is running the show.

But in this situation, the boss is in a fix. All the conveyor belts have jammed, the workers are threatening to walk out, the pupils are causing a riot. The situation has got totally out of control, and the boss hasn't a clue what to do.

Through practising with this, I've learned that I can happily embrace the don't-know state. In fact, it can be a great joy because it relieves responsibility. I can step down from my role as the boss, join the rebellious workers in riotous freedom. Though in practice, the riot stops the instant the boss steps down. Everything changes once I stop pretending to be in control.

Though these memories help, I still get stuck to the pedestal, fooled into believing that everything will disintegrate if I don't maintain order. Getting through that barrier of fear, climbing down from the boss's pedestal—this requires lots of patience. As best I can, I bear witness to the fear, feeling its texture in my body, trusting that things will somehow work out.

Eventually, I slipped off the pedestal into a joyful freedom from responsibility. I could also sense the danger of identifying with that carefree state. But of course, this is just another dead end. Identifying with any state of mind, even the most joyous, brings suffering when the state breaks up, as it's bound to do eventually.

Knowing this, I made an effort to tread the middle path between carefree joy and the attempt to identify as the boss and control matters. The desire to plunge into identification was very strong. I really wanted to define myself either as the one who is joyful or the control freak. Either identification felt preferable, more stable than the precarious middle ground. I no longer had the balance of mind needed to frame any questions for inquiry. So at that stage I moved on to the last of the Buddha's suggestions for dealing with distractions.

Before going on to that, I want to emphasize how gentle we need to be with our questions. The process is like psychotherapy, where the therapist needs to be very respectful of the client and not rush them along. The therapist strand in my mind needs constant restraining.

The client needs a lot of reassurance. Using Buddhaghosa's analogy, the lion needs to be reminded not to eat the animals he is questioning, and they need considerable reassurance that his motives are benign. This becomes especially important as the lion approaches the smaller animals—as we go deeper into our fears.

The hare, in Buddhaghosa's story, at first refuses to take the lion to his resting place. The lion slowly talks him into this disclosure, speaking sometimes gently, sometimes firmly. And when the lion works out the cause of the problem, he doesn't crow in triumph but takes time to reassure the animals that there's nothing to fear. This paints a picture of the tenderness and respect with which we care for the fearful strand in our minds as we try to get to the bottom of the disturbance.

Going on to the final suggestion: "If, while he is giving attention to stilling the thought formations, there still arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then, with teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind."

By comparison to the gentle language of the previous example, the Buddha uses very forceful words here. He gives an equally stark analogy of a strong man seizing a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beating him down, constraining him, and crushing him.

What are we to make of this? Elsewhere in the scriptures the Buddha praises qualities like patience, care, and kindness. But here he is asking us to beat someone up, at least in our imagination. It would appear that there is a time for everything, and this is the time for our aggressive tendencies to be put to good use.

In my case, as I attempted to find a middle way between heedless irresponsibility and absolute control, I used suppression as a means of forcing myself back towards the middle ground. At times I felt the strong urge towards that sense of absolute control, becoming the boss. To combat this, I put all my energy into saying "No."

Very strong tensions ran through the body to combat desire in this way. My jaw set like iron, my breath stopped. Body and mind were completely locked in combat between "I want" and "no." Eventually a truce was called, the breath started flowing, the tension eased up a little, and I felt a trickle of energy flowing through the most jammed-up section of the body. The ending of the battle didn't feel like victory or defeat—more like moving on, with the sense of something within having been freed up, although I couldn't name what had changed.

The sensations that flowed through the previously jammed-up area released a trickle of joy and even bliss in their wake. But after a few moments, the desire to identify locked hard onto some new outlet—at times the trickle of joy, at other times the grief at not being able to control this and call it mine. Again my body and mind stiffened as I resisted this new identity with all my might.

On and on it went until desire burnt out somewhat and I could feel myself relaxing, no longer overwhelmed by the need to identify with experience. At that point I returned to the standard vipassanā technique, knowing experience objectively without interfering.

Although I was feeling battle-weary, I sensed that some deeper wisdom had been gained. I found myself reflecting on the meaning of anattā and saying, "So I really am not this body and mind." Although there was still some fear and grief at the words, these emotions were balanced by acceptance and wonder. The obvious next question—what on earth am I then?—was not forming, which was a blessed relief. There was a degree of ease with being unable to understand the mystery of what I am.

The phrase "peace beyond understanding" came to mind and started to make sense. At some level I'd broken free from the tyrant within me who demands to know and understand what life is all about. Though I knew this was just a temporary break, I was deeply grateful for the relief.

To close the sutta, the Buddha repeats his five suggestions for dealing with distractions which come up when we get deeply concentrated. First, we give attention to the alternative wholesome thought, such as mettā. If that doesn't work, we reflect on the danger posed by the unwholesome thoughts—which is basically the same as in last night's sutta, though in this case the language is more strongly condemnatory, and we

sling a carcass around our necks to drive the point home. Thirdly, we forget about the disturbing thoughts and distract our attention elsewhere, such as to the periphery of the body or objects in the room. Fourthly, we undertake the process of inquiring into the underlying thought formations with the aim of bringing them to stillness. Finally, there is the advice to suppress the disturbance by force majeure.

After each suggestion, the Buddha reiterates the hoped-for outcome: "With the abandoning of the unwholesome thoughts, the mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated." Note that there is no judgment if any of these steps fail. We don't have to think of ourselves as bad meditators if we have to go to the last step and suppress the disturbance. Instead, we can think of this as a step of deep purification.

The Buddha concludes by saying that using this practice, the meditator becomes a master of thought: "He will think whatever thought he wishes to think, and he will not think any thought he does not wish to think."

Wouldn't it be wonderful never to think thoughts we don't want to think? Never again to worry or obsess over details? Never to harbour resentment or jealousy? Never to think ourselves into a panic?

And imagine always being able to think those thoughts we want to think—always able to think well of ourselves and others, to wish ourselves well in all circumstances, to find some positive, optimistic thought even when we feel depressed or when the situation seems desperate. Even if bandits were sawing us apart limb by limb, as the Buddha describes in another sutta, we could think compassionately of our poor body and of the bandits who are making such bad kamma for themselves.

The Buddha's final words on the matter are that having become a master of thought, the meditator "has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with the complete penetration of conceit, he has made an end to suffering."

CHAPTER 30

In the Seeing, Only the Seeing... (Bāhiya Sutta) - Read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · 45 min

> *This talk offers a rich exploration of the Bāhiya Sutta (Ud 1.10), the remarkable story of Bāhiya of the Bark Cloth, who achieved full enlightenment after receiving only a few words of teaching from the Buddha during an alms round. The teaching draws on Buddhaghosa's commentary to paint a vivid picture of Bāhiya's character—his near-death experience at sea, his resourcefulness in making robes from bark, and his single-pointed determination to find liberation, traveling 1,200 miles to meet the Buddha.*
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> *The core teaching examined is the Buddha's instruction: 'In the seen there is only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized.' This practice of 'just seeing' involves training ourselves to experience sensory contact without the usual proliferation of judgments, stories, and reactions. When we stop adding layers of craving and grasping to raw experience, the construction of a localized self dissolves—we are neither 'here' nor 'there' nor anywhere in between.*
>
> *The talk skillfully navigates between conventional and ultimate reality, explaining how this training relates to the destruction of craving and the cessation of dukkha. Practical guidance is offered for working with concepts like 'you' and 'that' in vipassanā meditation, understanding how the mind constructs self-location through clinging to sense doors and sense objects. The teaching illuminates how equanimity develops as we release identification with being the observer, allowing awareness to rest in its momentary nature—where hearing happens, but no one hears.*

Bahiya holds the record for being the quickest of the Buddha's disciples to reach enlightenment. He received only a very brief training, a few words while the Buddha was on his alms round. These were the first and only words of Dhamma Bahiya had ever heard, and yet he gained full enlightenment as he listened. It's an inspiring story.

Bahiya, we are told, was a respected recluse living by the seashore, known as Bahiya of the Bark Cloth because his robes were made from bark. One day he pondered his own level of spiritual understanding, asking himself: "Now, of those who in this world are arahants or have entered the path leading to arahantship, am I one?" He couldn't answer this, and we're told that a compassionate deva appeared before him saying,

"You, Bahiya, are neither an arahant nor have entered the path leading to arahantship. You do not even have a practice whereby you can become an arahant or enter that path."

Bahiya was greatly chastened by this, but luckily not disheartened, and immediately asked where he could find an arahant to teach him. The deva tells him that the Buddha is currently living at Jeta's Grove in Savatthi and teaching the Dhamma there. It's a long way away, some twelve hundred miles, but Bahiya doesn't hesitate for a moment to set out and hurry as fast as he could.

When he gets to Jeta's Grove, he is told that the Buddha is out on alms round. Not willing to wait another moment, Bahiya hurries out in pursuit, and upon finding the Buddha, throws himself down at his feet, exclaiming, "Teach me the Dhamma, O Blessed One. Teach me the Dhamma, O Well-Gone One, that will be for my long-term welfare and bliss."

The Buddha at first refuses, saying that he is on alms round and not free to teach. Bahiya repeats his request again and again, arguing that either his own or the Buddha's life could be ended at any moment. On the third request, the Buddha relents, saying:

"Then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus. In the seen there is only the seen. In the heard, only the heard. In the sensed, only the sensed. In the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will only be the seen in the seen, only the heard in the heard, only the sensed in the sensed, only the cognized in the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you are neither here nor there, nor anywhere in between. Just this is the end of suffering."

As Bahiya listened to these words, the penny dropped and he was liberated.

The Buddha went on his way, and just as Bahiya had feared, he died shortly after, having been attacked by a cow. When the Buddha later came across Bahiya's body, he told his disciples to cremate it and erect a memorial. When they asked him about Bahiya's destination, his future life, the Buddha replied that Bahiya is totally unbound —meaning that he is liberated from suffering and rebirth.

Before we look at the teaching at the core of the sutta, I think it's helpful to paint a picture of Bahiya for ourselves. One reason is that the teaching itself, as with so much of the Dhamma, invites us to deconstruct our normal understanding of reality, to see that we're not this, not that. Though this is essential, we also have to make an effort to reconstruct our understanding of reality, where I am me and you are you and a dog is a

dog and so on. This normal understanding is sometimes described as conventional reality, whereas the deconstructed version is termed ultimate reality. The spiritual life requires that we navigate both levels peacefully. If we focus only on the ultimate level, this can lead to abstraction; we grow aloof from the world.

If we engage with the story of Bahiya, we warm up the teaching, bring our humanity to the forefront as we listen to the Dhamma. We can remember also that the Buddha always chose exactly the right teaching for each person. So if we can put ourselves in Bahiya's shoes, we might hear the teachings in a more meaningful way.

Some people think that Bahiya was already highly developed spiritually. The sutta doesn't give us much evidence for this, and I like the interpretation given by Buddhaghosa, an Indian monk and scholar who lived about a thousand years after the Buddha. Although interpretations lose some of the original purity, I think they have a value in their own right. The Buddha's presence, his calm, authority, body language, facial expression—all these would have added hugely to the words he spoke. As his real-life impact died away, myths and stories would have been added to the teachings as a human effort to retain some shadow of his presence. Of course, this will include cultural bias, and we don't have to take these as gospel, but they may make it easier for us to hear the teachings, to detect human warmth in them, rather than read them as a very dry manual of spiritual practice.

Buddhaghosa gives us a prequel to the sutta, suggesting that Bahiya was actually a novice in spiritual terms, even a bit of a fraud. Earlier, he and others had gone out to sea. Their ship sank and all his comrades were drowned, but Bahiya managed to cling to a plank and survive. Perhaps he was battered against rocks, because by the time he made it ashore his clothes had been torn away. There was, and still is in parts of Asia, a tradition of making sheets of cloth from the sodden bark of trees, and Bahiya obviously had mastered this skill. From other suttas we see that being naked could lead to being despised and abused. It shows great strength of character that the half-drowned, bruised and battered Bahiya managed to weave himself a cloak—a task few of us would have the patience to manage, even in the peak of health and well-being.

By a lucky twist of fate, the bark cloth works in his favour. When the local people saw him, they assumed he was an ascetic who had renounced clothing, even assuming he was fully enlightened, an arahant. And so they started giving him food. Bahiya realised he was on to a good thing and decided to eschew fine clothes and continue in his bark cloth, becoming known as Bahiya of the Bark Cloth.

Bahiya then starts to wonder whether perhaps he is enlightened. There are reports of people mistaking themselves as enlightened because they've developed concentration to the extent that the hindrances are suppressed and they live in a state of bliss. Perhaps this was the case for Bahiya.

Perhaps all this talk of being an Arahant persuaded Bahiya to dabble in meditation. He may well have had a mind that concentrated easily—the ease with which he picks up the Buddha's words suggests this. People with good concentration can achieve a state of jhāna where the mind is absorbed in bliss. My guess is that Bahiya fell into a jhāna and then started wondering whether this bliss meant he was enlightened.

Whatever about concentration, Bahiya's spiritual assets certainly include energy, determination, and perseverance. To have survived a situation where five companions perished shows a real strength of will. Bahiya doesn't give up easily, and once he realised that enlightenment involves his long-term welfare and bliss, he becomes single-mindedly focused on that goal. His zeal for liberation would have been spurred by acute awareness of mortality, as his plea to the Buddha demonstrates. Buddhaghosa's story of near drowning gives a context for this.

Although we might think of someone who suffered such a calamity as very unfortunate, in spiritual terms the shock of a near-death experience can be a great motivator. This is why we are encouraged to reflect on our mortality, go to cemeteries or view bodies decomposing, so as to make this more real. A near-death experience makes us painfully aware of the lack of any security in this life. We become disillusioned, perhaps depressed, lose interest in the pleasures of this world. When the Buddha realised the reality of sickness, old age, and death, it is said that he returned to his palace like a lion pierced in the heart. That state of misery prompted the Buddha's spiritual life. Similarly, Bahiya was determined to find a truth and security which transcended worldly life.

Last but not least, Bahiya had great faith. He doesn't waste any time doubting the Dhamma or his own potential for enlightenment. He goes straight for this prize. With a kind of naive bull-headedness, he is only interested in learning from an Arahant. The fact that the Buddha is twelve hundred miles away doesn't faze him for an instant.

So Bahiya is an energetic, resourceful, determined character, and because of his near-death experience, strongly motivated to seek liberation. He's blessed with great faith in his own abilities, in the reality of enlightenment, and in the Buddha. We see his single-mindedness again when, after his twelve-hundred-mile journey, he doesn't dream of resting but immediately rushes out of Jeta's Grove in pursuit of the Buddha, doesn't hesitate to interrupt his alms round, pesters him basically, until he receives the teachings.

Bahiya's story is a testament to the power of absolute one-pointed determination, faith, and energy. But this do-or-die attitude is easily hijacked by greed. It needs to be balanced by an equal preference for calm and tranquillity, a sense that all is okay, just as it is.

The Sutta gives this very beautiful description of the personage Bahiya saw when he eventually caught up with the Buddha on his alms round: "Serene and inspiring serene confidence. Calming. His senses at peace. His mind at peace. Having attained the utmost tranquillity and poise. Tamed. Guarded. His senses restrained. A great one, Nāga."

This suggests that it was the very presence of the Buddha that allowed Bahiya to calm down, bring his mind to rest upon the words the Buddha spoke, let them penetrate deep enough for full liberation.

The Buddha's opening words—"Bahiya, you should train yourself thus"—clarify that this is a training, not an account of what enlightenment is. The Buddha is not interested in philosophy for its own sake, an abstract definition of truth. Intellectual understanding isn't enough for liberation. The truth of enlightenment has to be lived, and for this we need training. The Eightfold Path gives the full scope of training, addressing morality, views, and attitudes as well as mental training. But in this very succinct teaching to Bahiya, the Buddha focuses on the first step in the Eightfold Path: Right View. It's the way we see and understand the world that's most important. Everything else—our attitudes, our behaviour, our meditation—clicks into place if only we can be clear about what's actually happening in our moment-to-moment experience.

The Buddha's next words to Bahiya describe the bare simplicity of the practice: "In the seen, there is only the seen."

When we see, we normally see something. We see a book, a tree, a person. And then we think about it—whether we've read it, whether we'd like to read it. Same for the tree, the person. In reference to the seen, there is the seen plus all the thoughts and images and fond or unpleasant memories this provokes.

Now it's possible, of course, that we don't properly register what we see. We vaguely scan our environment to avoid bumping into things, too preoccupied to bother giving full attention to the visual scene. No thoughts about books or trees or people are evoked. But if we were to be properly mindful, we would detect a quick judgement, labelling whatever we see as irrelevant, not worth thinking about.

So there is the seen plus an aversive reaction, dismissing the sight as irrelevant, and the consequent decision to ignore.

Could we properly register the sight of a book, a tree, a person—and not react, not add any thoughts? Difficult. The term is "just seeing," and this is the spiritual practice we take from the Bahiya Sutta. We train by noticing the proliferation of thoughts, or the desire to avert our eyes and find something more interesting. We then resist these habitual reactions, drop the thoughts, bring our eyes back to the visual object itself—its color, its shape, its bookness—reminding ourselves that we are seeing.

When we train like this, we come closer and closer to the raw experience of seeing. We're dropping our opinions and judgments and preconceptions about the things we see, becoming more and more interested in the experience of seeing itself.

Can you imagine living in a world where we didn't add a thousand judgments and stories, a thousand summary dismissals as irrelevant, as we let our eyes go about their business of scanning our surroundings?

The teacher Gilles Fonseca gives an example of this from when he lived for a time in Morocco. He noticed his mind was much lighter than normal. He wasn't as troubled as usual in public. He eventually traced this to the fact that he wasn't reacting to people around him, making up stories about them. He realized it was because their clothing was so different from Western clothing—his habitual way of categorizing people just couldn't work. He had no way of judging, of working out what their lives were like, who was rich, who was poor, who had what trade. So he was just seeing the people around him.

This gave him a demonstration of the way we clog up our world and weigh ourselves down by adding layers and layers of unnecessary thought to whatever we see. He tasted the lightness of just seeing.

The Buddha uses the same instructions for the other senses. In the heard, there is only the heard. In the sensed—this is understood to refer to sensations from smell and taste as well as body—there is only the sensed. In the cognized, there is only the cognized.

This latter is interesting. Thoughts and images also have their place in a very simple, non-reactive way of relating to the world. The thought "book" could arise on seeing a book, but no further thoughts are provoked about whether or not we've read the book, or should read it, or any other thought stream.

At the very essence of seeing, hearing, sensing, there aren't thoughts—just simple sensations of color or pressure or vibrations on the eardrum. But to interact in an intelligent way with these, we need to allow several sensations to be processed by the mind so as to form perceptions and concepts like book, tree, person. This is happening all the time in the background as we go about our daily business.

I got a glimpse into the extent of background processing going on in my mind one time as I walked into the bathroom of my apartment. Normally the light switch also turns on a fan. But when I pressed the switch this time, the light came on but the fan didn't. I started hearing the fan nonetheless. In fact, I heard every little nuance of its whirring and buzzing as I'd never heard them before. That's because I was listening properly for the first time, knowing something was unusual but unable to work out what. It took a couple of seconds to realize that this was a mental sound playing in my mind—a memory of what the fan sounded like, not a real sound impacting on my ears.

My mind had made its own very accurate recording of the sound of the fan, and had probably been playing this every time I'd pressed that switch for the past several years. Perhaps this is my mind's way of policing the environment, projecting whatever it anticipates onto the screen of consciousness so that the real data can be compared to the memory. I don't know the rationale behind the mental recording, but it showed me how much quiet, clever, and accurate processing the mind can do in the background of our lives.

The training instructions given to Bahiya describe the body and mind carrying out their functions quite normally—seeing, hearing, sensing, cognizing. It's only our usual reactivity that's missing. And reactivity, remember, involves craving. We crave more of whatever sensations are deemed pleasant. We crave to get rid of those deemed unpleasant. We crave to ignore those we deem neutral.

We see the book. If we're an avid reader, this will be labeled pleasant, and craving perks us up as we register the pleasure on offer here. But if we loathe reading, then the image will be labeled unpleasant, and we crave to be rid of this irritation. If books mean little or nothing to us, we label the sight as neutral—we crave to ignore the sight, not to waste time letting our eyes rest on this irrelevance.

We're seldom aware of the craving underlying neutral feelings. But if you try resting your eyes on some fairly bland surface, you might soon feel a level of impatience. Your eyes will want to rove around, see something else. Your mind will probably want to think. This gives an insight into how deeply we crave to ignore sights we feel as neutral.

Craving leads on to grasping, sometimes called clinging. This is where we establish a sense of self, a central headquarters for experience. The headquarters we call "me" or "I" or "mine" can now marshal our physical and mental energies so as to fulfill craving.

In Bāhiya's training instructions, the Buddha clarifies that the goal is not to grasp, not to construct a sense of self, a central headquarters. "When for you, Bāhiya, there is in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized—then, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' to be found in relation to that."

We practice non-grasping in vipassanā. When we become equanimous, thoughts and feelings come and go. We watch our dramas without getting caught up. We have the sense of being the observer of our own experience—not interfering, just watching. Bhante uses the analogy of a birdwatcher concealed within a hide.

At times, even the observer disappears. There is breathing, feeling, sensing, cognizing, but no one watching all this. Experience is not centered around "me." Awareness doesn't seem to be located within my body as it normally is. When a bird sings, we're just aware of the sound. Usually it's "me in here" hearing "the bird out there." Now there's only the sound, without any reference to "me" at all.

We can still recognize the sound as birdsong, and we can still locate it, know roughly where it comes from. All the essential perceptions and cognitions needed to negotiate the world are functioning perfectly. We've just stopped referring everything back to "me" the hearer, "me" the observer. In the hearing, there is only the hearing. There is hearing, recognizing, but no one hearing, no one recognizing. We're no longer automatically mapping sensations and feelings into concepts like "me," "you," "self," "not-self."

As the Buddha told Bāhiya, "When in the hearing there is only the hearing, then Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in relation to that."

While Bāhiya grasped all this in a moment, we can make an effort to follow in his footsteps by bringing to mind concepts of "you" or "that" when the mind is steady in meditation. It's easiest to focus on just one—say the concept "you."

In my experience, a strong desire to understand the concept is stirred. Tensions build in the body, and the mind starts to polarize. I'm experiencing the effort needed—by an unenlightened being, anyhow—to frame and hold a concept. The calming factors, especially tranquility and equanimity, balance this polarizing effect. I realize that I have to continually let go of the concept for any peace.

A very vague "you" takes shape as an image, as if I'm looking at myself in a mirror, then dissolves again. The dissolving is experienced as peaceful, pleasant, but tinged with sadness—as if I'm saying goodbye. Then the desire to form the concept, to know this "you," starts the process again. It becomes clear that the desire is associated with a sense of self, an "I" who wants to know this vague, unstable "you" which is continually fading away.

This practice helps us make peace with the conceptual mind. It's the attachment to concepts like "you" and "that" which snares us in dukkha. As we train ourselves to steady the mind around these concepts, we slowly purify our attachments. We learn that concepts aren't ultimate reality. The only reality in the midst of a concept like "you" are the sensations and feelings experienced as I try to hold the concept in mind.

We have a preference for pleasant feelings. These are associated with relaxation, the letting go of the concept. It's lucky we're designed like that. Our preference for tranquility won't let us get too attached to our concepts. And yet we want to know ourselves.

Dhamma-chanda can be described as the desire to know our true nature. This desire springs from wisdom and drives the spiritual life. But because of attachment, taṇhā gets mixed in. We want to gain something out of all this effort. Perhaps it's power—we want to be in control of experience, not at the mercy of circumstances. Perhaps it's the desire to love or be loved. Perhaps we want to save ourselves from dukkha.

In pure form, these desires are all worthy aspects of dhamma-chanda. But delusion allows them to get hijacked by greed. Delusion tells us we are, or could be, that entity who is in control, who loves and is loved, who saves the world from dukkha.

Only as we sit still, burning with desire in vipassanā, can we start to separate out taṇhā—the greed for spiritual progress—from dhamma-chanda, the wise desire to be present with experience just as it is. The desire to know our true nature stirs us to frame a concept like "you," while tranquility and equanimity persuade us to let go of the concept.

It's a tightrope. Because of our deep attachment to conceptual thought, tranquility often presents the wisest option. However, we can go overboard here, come to dread and deplore conceptual thought because it's so disturbing.

It is useful to be able to think, however. Even an Arahant might need to think about issues when deciding on a course of action. The story of Brahma advising the Buddha to teach the Dhamma could be interpreted as the Buddha's rational thinking mind in conversation with his enlightened nature. Brahma in Indian mythology represents the wisest being. While he lived, the Buddha had being nature, human nature. The

Buddha's being, because it is no longer deluded, is the wisest being—is Brahma. Thus, even an Arahant will at times need to generate concepts so as to weigh up matters, to decide whether a course of action is worthwhile.

The Buddha used concepts like "I" and "me" and "you" all the time as he taught. In particular, he taught the practice of metta, to cherish and care for ourselves as individuals, to care for each being as an individual being. Being able to frame the millions of colours and sounds and sensations and feelings that arise each moment as concepts—me, mine, you, yours—is a very important aspect of human intellect and interaction. And, at least on this side of liberation, it is a necessary basis for compassion.

Thus, we undertake the practice of forming concepts in meditation as part of the path of purification. Although we might sense conceptualisation as disturbing a more peaceful meditation, and we might quickly detect ourselves grasping onto concepts like "you" and "I," we cannot afford to shirk away from the task. Otherwise, we simply get attached to tranquility and equanimity. This can lead to the delusion which marked the start of Bahiya's journey—wondering whether perhaps he was enlightened.

Working with the conceptual mind in Vipassana links to the teaching on the destruction of craving, where the Buddha advises us to understand experience within the reflection: "This has come to be." This anger has come to be. This peace has come to be. This boredom has come to be. This itching has come to be. Every experience can be understood within the phrase.

At times, when we watch an experience—say it's an itching sensation—we find that it fades away. What are we left with? Our attention can be riveted, focused on the spot where the itching faded, but we can't name what's holding attention anymore. The desire to describe is felt as disturbing. As the body and mind relax, letting go of the desire to think, the focus for awareness broadens, sensing peace in the broad expanse of a mind that isn't interested in thinking. This is a mind that is, for a few moments anyhow, content within itself, not trying to work things out, sort out this from that.

After a while, restlessness or some other hindrance sets in. I often find the mind flickering at what seems like its outer border, trying to expand the circle of awareness. As it peeks momentarily into what we might call the outer darkness, it labels the darkness as "that," because it seems beyond its grasp—objective, external. A moment later, it flickers towards a brightness associated with a physical sensation and pleasant feeling. It labels the brightness as "this" because it feels like me, mine, eminently graspable.

These flickering movements of mind give us a chance to study the next reflection the Buddha recommends in the teaching on the destruction of craving: "This arises with that as nutriment." We grasp at pleasant feelings, think of them as mine, because the mind is not satisfied with its own limits. It senses something beyond itself, something external, something it can call "that." But the concept "that" opens the door to the concept "this." Our logical mind demands that if there's something external, then there has to be something internal looking out. And so we start grasping towards the body, feelings, perceptions, and so on as me and mine. We become the observer again.

To let go of that sense of being the observer, we need to make peace with the limits of our knowledge. Can we resist the temptation to look beyond what's right here, right now? Challenging, but a worthy practice.

The last thing the Buddha says to Bahiya is: "When there is no you there, then you are neither here nor there, nor anywhere in between. Just this is the end of suffering." When the mind isn't forming the concept "me," then there's no location for the self. There can still be spatial knowledge. We can locate books and trees and other visible objects as well as the source of sounds. We can move our body appropriately. We don't get our arms mixed up with our legs. It's just that the mind isn't generating a focal point for "me" in the world.

Normally, we locate ourselves as here, somewhere within our body. When we see a tree, we think of ourselves as the one who sees. Focusing more closely, we sense that we are identifying with the moment-to-moment experience of seeing. We're clinging to those atoms of colour that are being strung together to form the concept "tree." This is to cling to the sensory process—in this case, the eye and seeing. But clinging is painful.

Realising this, we loosen our grip. We relax. It's a relief to let the tree be there, outside of me. Just a tree, after all.

But after a while, a niggling doubt sets in. How is it we know what is there outside of ourselves? To our dismay, perhaps, we sense that we are now clinging to the notion of *there*. It's pleasant to think of there being an external world—something I'm not solely responsible for, something I can let go of, ignore when I wish to. And yet I would be very dismayed to find the tree was not there when next I looked outside my window.

Sadly, I have to admit that I've now gone and attached myself to the sense object. In this case, the tree. I'm projecting part of this delusive construct of me outside of myself, and at the moment it's very bound up with the concept of the tree that grows outside my window.

Clinging to the sense doors, we locate ourselves as *here* within our bodies. Clinging to the sense object, we locate ourselves as *there* in the outside world. Both attempts to cling are painful.

As we let go of these concepts, equanimity grows. Sensations and perceptions associated with both here and there slide from head to heart. We're no longer interested in defining these as one or the other. It's as if the boundaries to the self grow permeable. The heart can now include aspects of the outer world, such as the tree.

If I were to ask, where am I? I would answer that I'm not located at a particular spot, but as a nebulous consciousness, larger than my body, hovering somewhere in between my inner and outer worlds.

When we identify as the observer of experience in this way, we're identifying with consciousness—that which knows experience. It's the birdwatcher in the hide. A very beautiful state of being, very worthy. At least on this side of liberation, however, it's still a conditioned state, a composite knowing of several sensations and feelings.

To take another step along the path, we let that observer melt into its underlying nature: the momentary knowing of a sensation, feeling, or mind state. When we can resist all temptations to locate ourselves either *here* within our inner world, or *there* in the outer world, or in between as the equanimous observer—then there will be in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized.

The body and mind function perfectly. We can interact intelligently with the world. The only thing that's missing is the sense of self.

The blackbird sings in the tree. We know this. Hearing happens. But no one hears. No one knows.

I end with the epitaph for Bāhiya, spoken by the Buddha:

Where water, earth, fire and wind have no footing,
there the stars don't shine,
the sun isn't visible,
there the moon doesn't appear,
there darkness is not found.
And when a sage, a brahman through wisdom,
has realised this for himself,

then from form and formless,
from pleasure and pain,
he is freed.

CHAPTER 31

Greed, Hatred and Delusion as Foundations for Mindfulness

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

> *In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan returns to the jewel of the Buddha's teachings, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), focusing particularly on the third foundation - contemplation of mind (cittānupassanā). She explores how the three mental poisons of greed (rāga), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) can become objects of mindful investigation rather than obstacles to overcome.*
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> *The talk distinguishes between skillful desire (chanda) and reactive craving (taṇhā), showing how even beneficial activities like gardening or parenting can involve both wholesome motivation and subtle greed. Through practical examples, Noirin demonstrates how to work with anger using the Buddha's teaching of the two arrows - the initial hurt and our reactive response that creates additional suffering.*
>
> *Drawing on the Dhammapada's instruction to guard the mind, she guides practitioners in recognizing these mental states both internally and externally, seeing their arising and passing away. This contemplation develops the capacity to rest awareness within difficult mind states without identification, gradually weakening their hold and opening pathways to greater freedom and compassion.*

Tonight I'd like to revisit what's held as the jewel of the Buddha's teachings, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, focusing especially on the third part, contemplation of mind. *Satipaṭṭhāna*, remember, is often translated as a foundation or support, or more evocatively, as a posture for mindfulness, a resting place for awareness.

There are four *satipaṭṭhānas*: body, feelings, mind and *dhammas*, the last one including the main teachings of the Buddha. When we're in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*, we're directing attention inwards into our mind.

Sometimes the Buddha distinguishes between consciousness, *viññāṇa* in Pali, and the mind, the *nāma* component of *nāmarūpa*. Consciousness is the knowing of experience, while *nāma* comprises mental factors like will and perception, which can in themselves be known. The analogy often used is a movie theatre with consciousness as the screen and *nāma* as the picture we see on the screen. For *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation we include both screen and the movie, the knowing and the mental factors that can be known.

In this *satipaṭṭhāna*, we're looking backwards, you could say, looking into what's looking. We're letting attention rest within the mind that's asking attention to rest. This is possible because the mind has a receptive aspect, the mind door, as well as its active components like perception, attention and intention, the components that enable it to direct experience, to focus attention, to cognize.

The mind door is similar to the physical senses and is considered as the sixth sense in Buddhism. The receptive aspect of mind can detect mental activity and thereby act as a doorway, allowing that mental activity become conscious.

The guidance for this *satipaṭṭhāna* starts with: "And how does one abide contemplating mind as mind? Here one knows mind affected by greed as mind affected by greed and mind unaffected by greed as mind unaffected by greed." The Pali word *rāga* is used here which can be translated as greed, lust, passion, attachment or craving.

In Western culture, passion can be seen in a positive light, as when somebody says, "I'm passionate about gardening." Likewise, we often think of attachment in positive terms. Mother and baby, for example, are encouraged to make a strong bond of attachment. And if this doesn't happen, they both suffer emotionally. But in Buddhism, we speak of passion and attachment in the same sense as greed, lust and craving. Along with hatred and delusion, *rāga* is described as one of the three poisons of the mind.

How can we think the attachment between mother and baby in terms of mental poison? And what about passion? Are we never to get enthusiastic about anything?

The Buddhist term *chanda* can be used to describe skillful desire. Ajahn Sucitto describes *chanda* as "desire as an eagerness to offer, to commit, to apply oneself to meditation. It's a psychological yes, a choice, not a pathology." *Chanda*, skillful desire, is in contrast to *taṇhā*, which is the desire that comes in reaction to our feelings. *Taṇhā* leads to suffering, as we vainly try to grasp pleasures that are always slipping through our fingers, whereas *chanda* is grounded in wisdom rather than reactive delusion.

If we're passionate about gardening, we can bring this into our Dhamma path by reflecting on the benefits, for example, care for the earth, respect for nature, beautifying the world, giving pleasure to others, promoting bodily and mental health. We can see gardening as *muditā*, appreciating the good things in life. But greed can easily slip in, as when we want to have the best garden in the neighbourhood. Although the activity is skilful, we can start grasping after its fleeting pleasures and turn it into something stressful.

It's similar for the attachment between parent and child. Parenthood can be brought into our Dhamma path by reflecting on the goodness involved. When the child brings joy, we can be grateful, remembering that joy itself is part of the spiritual path. But again, we have to guard against role identification, otherwise we will be devastated when the child disappoints us or flees the nest. Once we get emotionally involved in how we want our children to turn out, we're on the slippery slope.

Because we're not yet enlightened, all our attachments are going to have some level of greed as well as compassion, goodwill and *muditā*. Even during meditation practice, we'll all spend some time craving a better meditation. In this Sutta, the Buddha clarifies that this is not a problem. All we have to do is recognize the mind state of greed when it is present. We don't have to judge it as wrong or combat it in any way. We only have to know the experience of greed while it is present.

By simply noting "greed, greed" whenever this arises, we learn not to identify with the mind state. It is just another phenomenon arising due to conditions. It doesn't represent me. The more we clarify this, the less we will be troubled or controlled by the state. Greed will be welcome when it comes, because we're interested to get to know its raw energies.

Whenever we notice ourselves wanting a better meditation, we have a golden opportunity to get to know greed. There may be some pleasant feelings associated with thoughts of insight, peace and tranquility. Probably also unpleasant feelings associated with the fact that these aren't happening right now. Acknowledging both the pleasant and the unpleasant moves us towards equanimity, the objective observer, the bird-watcher in the hide.

This, of course, is a very wise and worthy state of being, the state we normally cultivate in *vipassanā*. But to get to know the mind state of greed a bit better, we can creep out of the hide, get a bit closer to those birds which fascinate us. Of course, we have to be very patient, knowing we'll scare away the birds at the slightest noise. And we must be prepared for a long wait back in the hide whenever this happens, letting body awareness cool whatever passions have been generated.

When we're studying the mind state of greed, the bird we want to see more clearly is the knowing of pleasant feeling. We relax as best we can to allow pleasant feelings become more prominent. Then we focus attention on the mind that watches these, the knowing of pleasure. This is a tricky business. Our attachments to pleasure run deep and of course we can only enjoy pleasure if we know it, are conscious of it.

We're so deeply attached to the pleasure of knowing, of being conscious, that we simply take it for granted. The sense of self grows strong as we resist the notion that consciousness might not actually be me, mine. Could it really just be something that's happening? A chance combination of some sense object out in the world being detected by a sensor based in my body, animated by a moment of attention. It's hard to think about life in these terms. It gets too complicated for our brain to cope with.

In my case, reflections like these stir the desire to build a better picture of what's going on. This is another example of greed mixed in with *chanda*. In this case, dhamma *chanda*, the desire to understand the true nature of the world.

Armed with the instructions to know the mind affected by greed as the mind affected by greed, I don't have to curb greed, but simply let mindfulness rest in this instance of third *satipaṭṭhāna*. Attention retreats from its usual external orientation to explore the experience of knowing. There's a sense of moving inwards to what feels like my core. But what can be said about the experience?

There's certainly a pleasure in knowing experience. Pleasure is most clearly epitomized as pleasant sensations in the body. Greed tends to embroider these with thoughts of me and mine, but mindfulness detects the effort needed to blow up these bubbles of thought and the stress involved in that. Seeing the futility of grasping, greed fades and equanimity allows awareness to rest more easily in those pleasant sensations which now acquire perceptions of ease and goodwill.

At the same time, I start to lose touch with what I had termed the core of myself, the sense of being the one who knows experience. I realize that I cannot actually experience pleasure and maintain the sense of myself as the knower of pleasure.

As usual with any *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, mindfulness brings us to the edge of our comfort zone where we are resisting the limitations of our human condition. Resting awareness within the discomfort allows us bit by bit to make peace with our limitations. This exercise helps us come to terms in particular with the limitations of consciousness, learning that we cannot have that broad overview of all experience which brings the sense of being the observer, the one who knows, while also knowing any one experience in any detail, such as pleasant feeling in the body. We have to compromise, let attention move in and out as conditions dictate.

At times like these, it could be useful to practice with the second part of the instruction on greed, to notice when the mind is not being affected by greed. While we are willing to compromise to allow attention move around as circumstances dictate, the mind is not being dominated by greed. However, reflecting the mind is not affected by

greed brings us to another edge to the comfort zone. It's pleasant to experience a quiet mind without the strong pushes and pulls associated with greed. But because it's so pleasant, greed also wants to know the mind that is not affected by greed. It's a conundrum.

We slowly learn to accommodate this limit to what we can know by allowing greed to come and go as we explore non-greed, the absence of greed. In my experience, energies of greed burn in the face and head but are continually being cooled, washed away by the more calming energies of the breath. The exercise helps us get to know greed in a non-judgmental way. Moments of greed meet moments of non-greed. It's not a battle, just a dance.

But a dance doesn't last forever. Greed can turn to anger at its inability to possess the pleasant, calming feelings associated with non-greed. To help us work with this, we have the next line of the Sutta which goes: "One knows mind affected by anger as mind affected by anger, and mind unaffected by anger as mind unaffected by anger."

Anger is a manifestation of ill will. It's a reaction against what we perceive as unpleasant. Within the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, anger isn't a problem but an opportunity to get to know ill will. In milder forms, ill will might take the hue of disinterest or dullness. We simply turn away from the world of experience, shield ourselves with mental fog. If the perceived threat penetrates that fog, ill will might take more active forms like irritation, impatience or suspicion. If the sense of threat grows really strong, we forget any agenda except defending ourselves and ill will could manifest as fear, hatred or rage.

The Buddha's metaphor of the two arrows illustrates the sad stupidity of ill will. We have the initial unpleasantness. For example, someone insults us. The hurt we feel at the insult is like being pierced by the first arrow. Rather than tend to this wound, we react with anger. This is like stabbing ourselves with the second arrow. Every time we speak or act on this anger, we remind ourselves of the insult, unwittingly stabbing ourselves again and again.

The metaphor graphically illustrates the pain we inflict on ourselves through anger. The pain of the second arrow isn't immediately obvious. In fact, we generally feel better when we react with anger. The insult hurts, makes us feel small and insignificant. But the reaction of anger builds us up again, makes us feel righteous and strong. In our psyche, it is the other person who is diminished as we hurl insults back at them.

It's similar for all the other shades of ill will. At a surface level, they make us feel better. Impatience and irritation insist that the problem is out there. We would be fine if it wasn't for the idiot in the car in front who insists on stopping at all the traffic lights. It's only when we look at the experience in more detail that we can feel the second arrow.

Suppose the memory of a hurtful remark comes up in meditation. The body grows tense and in our mind we might fire daggers at the person who hurt us. While the image and thoughts put the enemy outside ourselves, we feel the push of aversion within our own body. At times it becomes apparent that anger splits us in two. The angry, assertive part holds all the power and feels like me. It flails about, tightening this muscle and then that, but it can never really pin down the you it seeks to crush.

Eventually we give up the useless battle and let the images fade. Tensions start to relax. As they do we have to admit that the anger was only a distraction covering up our original hurt at the harsh words. There's nothing for it but to feel those hurting sensations. This is to tend to the wound of the first arrow.

It's not easy to bear with the hurts and fears that underlie anger. Much easier to contort our body and mind in ill will. But with each reaction the habit grows. Eventually we see no good in the world. Everything is useless. Nobody is trustworthy. We're on the slippery slope towards a life of bitter isolation.

If we can learn to bear with unpleasant feelings, this has a transformative effect. The enemy is no longer out there. What we were crushing, we realize, was our feeling of hurt. Those feelings are embedded within our flesh, which might be trembling in fear. But there's also an impulse towards self-compassion. Within the fire of purification we learn to forgive ourselves for the hurts we've unwittingly caused and this makes it easier to forgive others.

We won't be able to tend to these inner wounds unless we allow the mind state of anger to reveal itself in mindfulness. Easier said than done. Most of us have been strongly conditioned to repress anger. This may be true for women even more so than men. The cultural message in my youth was, "Nice girls don't get angry." This forms a powerful part of our self-story and causes us to suppress anger.

It's not that suppression is always wrong. In daily life, it's often wise to suppress anger. To be able to suppress in a skillful way, we need to get to know the forces of suppression within us. In my experience, suppression is felt as a fierce weight on my head

which bears down through my forehead. Just sitting with this allows healing. And then, in a social situation where I need to contain anger, that suppressive force can come to my aid. I can welcome it joyfully as a friend.

Occasionally, expressing anger might be wiser than suppression, especially if our habit is to hide anger in passive aggression. Learning to assert ourselves is part of our spiritual path. Of course, we need to be ready to apologize when we get it wrong. A good rule of thumb is to do the opposite of what you really want. If you want to let rip at somebody, that's the time to take a few deep breaths before opening your mouth. If you're scared to say anything, want to clam up and nurse a new grievance, that's the time to summon courage and let it rip. Surprisingly, the release can sometimes propel us to a position of deeper friendship.

Anger plays a huge part in human life, for the most part destructive, but can be used skillfully when we've learned to befriend the state through mindfulness. Thus, we want to welcome the mind state of anger whenever this occurs in meditation. Allow awareness to examine all its various facets in body and mind. See where we're clinging. Let go if possible. Bear with the pain if not.

Within the honest gaze of mindfulness, we sense that anger keeps missing the target. It aims at the imaginary enemy but hurts only our own flesh. Seeing this futility the habit of anger fades and alternative pathways for coping with life's difficulties start opening up.

The skillful response to life's vicissitudes starts with accepting situations as they are. This doesn't mean becoming a passive doormat. We can recognise a situation as undesirable without letting that disturb our mental balance. "It's undesirable, but it's happening and I have to deal with this reality, not waste time thinking about how it ought to be." Acceptance fosters calm, which in turn allows for clear thought about how we might respond. If necessary, we can act vigorously to combat a threat and our actions will be more effective without anger clouding the mind.

A big part of exploring these alternative pathways is to notice when the mind state of anger is not present. This can prove a great boost to our spiritual self-confidence. Especially as awareness deepens, it might seem as though we must be the most hateful, angry person in the world. It's important to be able to counter that with direct proof that we can also be free from anger. When you're practicing *mettā*, for example, you could stop for a moment to acknowledge that the mind is not angry at this moment.

At times, however, even the absence of anger can prove challenging. When the heart is filled with *mettā*, the last thing it wants is to feel anger. And yet to notice the absence of anger, we have to remember what it is that's absent. So this practice deliberately recalls anger.

We must allow anger to arise, remind us of what is absent, and then fade, letting us see the absence of anger. This is certainly a challenge, but it develops the ability to work through anger towards whatever traits we detect in the absence of anger. These will probably include compassion for our human condition — at the mercy of strong desires and yet incapable of satisfying these.

The third exercise in the Sutta is to know mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. Greed hooks us to pleasant feelings while anger binds us to unpleasant feelings. When delusion predominates, we're ignoring sense data, dismissing it as unimportant. This happens when the experience is not very stimulating, neither threatening nor enticing. Ordinary activities like walking, standing in a queue, brushing our teeth, relaxing after a meal — all these are easy prey for delusion. Similarly, when things go quiet or the mind goes dull in formal meditation.

We withdraw to shield ourselves from the experience of sensations and feelings arising and passing at their own pace and without any respect for what I would prefer. Wrapped tight in a blanket of ignoring, we make up a little story. We tell ourselves we are an individual who lives within our body-mind system, that we are in charge of this subjective inner world, deciding what to say and where to go, what thoughts to think, and — if only other people didn't keep messing things up — what feelings to have.

While we're young and healthy, it's very pleasing to think that this lithe body and these feelings of vibrancy and strength are mine. If we're clever, then we feel proud of this, assuming cleverness is our personal achievement. Whatever advantage we have, we assume this is ours. The illusion gives us energy and confidence, helps us pursue our dreams. But it also makes us vulnerable.

The older we get, the more trouble we find. We were proud of our beauty, so now we're aghast at being wrinkled and ugly. We delighted in striding up mountains. Who is this old geezer who pants when climbing a few steps? We could motivate people, galvanise a crowd into action. How come I'm now alone and ignored? Sometimes we feel bewildered, sometimes ashamed, as if we have caused this decline, sometimes angry, believing the world has failed us. The illusion has now become a source of misery. We nurture delusion at our peril.

So we need to be vigilant. Watch out for those moments when we quietly withdraw and ignore what's going on around us. How easily this happens. How often have you resolved to follow the breath, only to discover five, ten, twenty minutes have elapsed without ever noticing the abdomen rising or falling? We've been completely lost in thoughts, worries, daydreams, plans.

If we catch ourselves early in this delusive drift, chances are the thought stream will be somewhat daft or inconsequential — wondering about tomorrow's weather, whatever happened to our old school books. These fairly neutral thoughts are typical of the deluded mind. It's not that greed is getting us all excited about a plan or daydream, or that anger is compelling us to rehash old grievances. Instead, it seems we're thinking just for the sake of it.

Why do we do this? Thinking divides the mind in two. There's the thought and the thinker. An external world and me. While the thoughts and images vary from weather to school books, the thinker feels constant. This allows us to perpetuate the idea of a permanent, real entity inside — a me which is at the centre of experience, knowing it, feeling it, commenting on it.

We also delude ourselves that we are in control. We can easily pretend that we've made the decision to open a door, until we try to do this mindfully and see how difficult it is to stop barging through rather than feel the hand moving towards the doorknob and the thousand other sensations that arise and pass before we step through the door.

Even when the mind has steadied in *vipassanā* and we're no longer lost in thought, the illusion is propelled by subtle, barely verbalised perceptions that associate I, me, mine with pleasant feelings. It seems that I'm the observer of all my experience. If we direct attention towards that sense of self, a subtle image may emerge, perhaps a glow of light or a pleasant feeling. We perceive this glow, this feeling, as me. But as soon as we rest attention there for a moment, we notice the glow shifts position, and now it seems like I am looking at things from a slightly different perspective. What in fact has happened is that the initial image faded, like all phenomena do, and we've created a new idea of self around another pleasant experience. When we see this sense of self shifting around like this, we begin to get a feel for the delusion that ensnares us.

We don't want to let the focus on delusion make us believe that the sense of self is innately wrong. It's quite the opposite, in fact. We need a healthy sense of self to accomplish anything, including getting ourselves to be mindful. We just want to see through the belief that this self is a substantial, permanent entity located somewhere within the body-mind system.

In fact, the instinctive tendency towards delusion can even be used beneficially. Delusion is fuelled by a need to feel whole within ourselves, self-sufficient, autonomous. When practising *mettā* for ourselves, we allow this powerful selfing instinct to find expression as conscious good wishes for ourselves. We are evoking a sense of self in order to care for ourselves. In this instance, the instinct to identify as a separate self is being used wisely. The idea, "this is me," energises the body and mind, lets us get ourselves together to accomplish things.

But at times we sense that idea fading. Attention rests on sensations without any central headquarters and no one commenting. We witness the body and mind operating according to their own laws. We see that the perception not-self fits this experience and sense the liberation on offer when we stop clinging to the idea of a self. Despite this, selfing starts up again.

On our way to liberation, we have to make peace with the mind affected by delusion. We need to cultivate a friendly attitude towards the deluded mind. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta gives us great support for this, letting us welcome delusion as an opportunity to explore delusions. Delusion will be present in all states of anger and greed, as well as more neutral states, like dullness. Whenever you feel a strong sense of self, use the reflection, "This is the mind affected by delusion," to establish yourself in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*. Allow the experience to unfold in whatever way it will.

Perhaps you'll start questioning that sense of self, wondering if it's really true. Perhaps anger will be stirred at the very thought of having your identity questioned. Perhaps greed will be stirred at the delightful self-image presented by delusion. We're also asked to notice the mind without delusion. At times when the central headquarters disappears, try reflecting, "This mind is not affected by delusion." As for anger and greed, noticing the absence of delusion may well prove a challenge. It may bring up grief as we acknowledge that the only way we can know this peaceful state is by continually saying goodbye to any budding sense of self.

Curiously, the exercise can also strengthen self-acceptance. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, we say. As clinging fades, appreciation for this suffering being, this body-mind system that seeks liberation, flows more strongly.

I'd like to end with some of the instructions given in what's termed the refrain of the Sutta, a section that's repeated again and again throughout all four *Satipaṭṭhāna*. Firstly, we're asked to practise the exercises internally, which is what I've been discussing — noticing our own greed, hatred and delusion. We're also asked to practise these externally, meaning we notice these in other people.

When we're in a crowd of frantic shoppers, we could pause for a while, acknowledging the greed driving our thoughts and feelings, and then reflect, "This is most likely what's driving all the other shoppers as well." When we're walking outdoors or in a similarly tranquil situation, we could take a moment to reflect on the absence of greed in our own mind and very probably in the minds of others around us. We do the same for anger and delusion.

If we see someone in a rage, we can reflect on the ill will driving their thoughts and feelings. Curiously, this can stir compassion rather than deepen our hostility. When we're in a social gathering, we can take a moment to reflect on the absence of ill will amongst the people present. This might deepen our sense of connection and trust. If someone is tipsy or talking in a highly charged melodramatic manner, we could reflect that delusion is dominating their mind at the moment. When we're meditating with others or we see someone absorbed in gardening or other grounded occupation, we could reflect that delusion is not a dominant force in their minds at this moment.

Recognising the presence or absence of greed, anger and delusion in others is a form of *mettā* practice. It brings other people into consciousness at quite an intimate level. This may stir a degree of comradeship and we start to see the others in a friendlier light. At other times the opposite may happen and the exercise brings up some emotional reaction. This is part of the purification process, helping us acknowledge others as human with similar challenges and limitations as ourselves and also with a similar potential for liberation. If we can bear with the negative emotions mindfully, the payoff is purification and increasing ability to relate skilfully to others.

The next instruction in the refrain is to see the arising and passing away of these mind states. Say someone treads on our toe and we feel a surge of anger arising. Very quickly that anger is going to persuade us of whatever story aversion normally brings up, and we'll be stuck in a very solid sense of self and think that life has always been this miserable way and always will be. If we can catch that moment of anger arising, we see that this story is being constructed, willed into existence. We're choosing the story out of habit. Although this is very unedifying to see, it's ultimately liberating. We learn to respond differently, tell ourselves more helpful stories that are closer to the truth. Same for greed and delusion. If we see them arising, we realise we are cooperating, willingly buying into these states. Of course, we have to be patient with these deeply conditioned habits, but slowly intuition starts to find more helpful ways of reacting.

To see the passing away of greed, hatred or delusion is also very instructive. For example, when we come home from a shopping trip, we could sit down, relax and feel the frenzy of shopaholism die away. This gives us a taste for the absence of greed. Let's see the value of the state. If we've had a blow-out with a colleague, we could go somewhere quiet, wait for the anger to die down, detect when the mind becomes rational again, appreciate the absence of anger. Similarly, we can detect the final moments of delusion. If we've been the one telling the melodramatic story, we can track the buzzing giddiness till it touches down to reality. Who knows what we will find? Perhaps relief? Humour? Shame? Whatever arises is part of our path to non-delusion.

Let's finish with a verse from the Dhammapada: "Let the discerning one guard the mind, so difficult to detect and extremely subtle, seizing whatever it desires. A guarded mind brings happiness."

CHAPTER 32

Exalted, Unexalted and Other Mindstates as Foundations for Mindfulness

Noirin Sheahan · 50 min

This retreat talk continues an exploration of the contemplation of mind (cittānupassanā) from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), examining five pairs of mental states that serve as foundations for mindfulness. Nóirín Sheahan begins with contracted and distracted mind—states connected to dullness and restlessness respectively—revealing how pleasant feelings draw the mind inward while unpleasant feelings push it outward, constructing our sense of 'this' and 'that,' subjectivity and objectivity.

The talk then explores exalted mind, grounded in the four brahmavihārā (divine abodes): mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā. Sheahan offers practical guidance on mettā practice using spatial imagination, while honestly addressing the 'near enemies' that masquerade as genuine goodwill—attachment posing as friendliness, pity as compassion, excitement as appreciative joy, and indifference as equanimity. The discussion of surpassed and unsurpassed mind examines how the seven factors of enlightenment work together organically, using the beautiful analogy of wild geese maintaining their V-formation.

Particularly illuminating is the treatment of concentrated and unconcentrated mind through the Pāli terms vicāra (applied thought) and vitakka (sustained thought), illustrated by the image of a bee hovering before landing on a flower. The talk culminates with liberated and unliberated mind—the experience of anattā when the constructed sense of self quietly disappears. Throughout, Sheahan emphasizes that seemingly 'lesser' states like restlessness or the surpassed mind are valuable objects of contemplation, helping practitioners make peace with their limitations and develop wisdom about how the mind constructs reality through craving.

Tonight I want to continue looking at the third section of the Satipatthana Sutta, the contemplation of mind. Last night we looked at the first three exercises: to know when the mind is or is not under the influence of greed, anger, and delusion.

The next line of the Sutta reads, "One understands contracted mind as contracted mind and distracted mind as distracted mind." Contracted mind is understood as being under the influence of dullness and lethargy, while distracted mind is what we normally call restlessness.

We can distinguish this exercise from our work with the corresponding hindrances. When we keep falling asleep, we're dealing with the hindrance of dullness and lethargy. The mind will be contracted, but we won't be able to discern this because we're too dozy. After working mindfully with the hindrance for a period, we may find that awareness steadies and we can observe the state quite closely. We still feel dozy, dull, but we're not asleep. We're aware of dullness. We might also be aware of the underlying feelings, which are usually pleasant feelings.

To rest attention in the third satipatthana, we focus on the mind that knows these pleasant feelings. "Contracted mind" describes this very well. It only knows those pleasant feelings. It doesn't know anything else. It's as if we've retreated from the world, locked ourselves into a comforting stupor.

In contrast to this, we have distracted mind. When we're fidgeting or can't keep track of the multitude of thoughts that keep cropping up, then we're dealing with the hindrance of restlessness. Again, after working with this mindfully, awareness may come to rest in the third satipatthana, and we can then experience the mind that's continually moving, searching for something. It's the same mind state in both cases, but because awareness is now focused on the mind state, those distractions can't get very far. They only disturb us to the extent necessary to register in awareness.

In contrast to the pleasant feelings associated with the contracted mind, the feelings associated with the distracted mind are usually unpleasant. The habit is to resist unpleasant feelings, and so the mind moves around trying to get away from the disturbance. Whereas in the case of dullness and lethargy, the mind contracts around the underlying pleasant feelings.

The two states can also be contrasted in terms of subjectivity and objectivity. In the contracted mind, the mind is subjectively oriented. It's all me. There's no room for anything else, anything objective. If it could summon the energy to describe experience, it might say "this," because we use the word "this" to describe what's immediate, present, within my grasp, mine. This chair I'm sitting on, this idea I'm considering. We use the word "that" to describe something that's external, not part of me—that chair you're sitting on, that idea you're putting forward.

The distracted mind is looking outwards. Its orientation is objective. It's searching the external world to escape its own displeasure. Each moment it lands on something new to call "that."

At times we might see the mind transiting between the two states. One moment it contracts around a pleasant feeling, perceives it as subjective, as "this" and "mine." The next moment it detects an unpleasant feeling and bounces away, calling it "that." When awareness is steady enough to see these transitions, we get a chance to see how the mind constructs such radically different versions of reality based on feelings. Pleasant feelings are perceived as here, within our grasp, internal, mine. They are readily labelled as "this." Unpleasant feelings are perceived as external, objective, something that can be pushed away, not mine, labelled as "that."

"This" and "that," subjectivity and objectivity, mine and not mine—they feed off one another. As the Buddha says in the discourse on the destruction of craving, "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises."

The better we can steady awareness around contracted and distracted states of mind, the better we can see how craving causes us to construct two separate worlds. One is internal, contracted around pleasant feeling. The other is external, extensive, allowing the mind to bounce from one object to another. When we fully understand these minute movements of mind, we'll see through the delusion caused by craving. When consciousness stops, even for a moment, clinging to the idea of this self as the ultimate reference point for the world, then the multitude of "thats"—that person, that challenge, that obligation—also disappear, and we're liberated from the stress of false view. It might only be momentary, but it punches a little hole in delusion.

Thus we should welcome lethargy, dullness, and restlessness whenever they come our way. Work mindfully with them until the mind can rest in the third satipatthana. They teach us what is meant by contracted and distracted mind and how we create our world out of pleasant and unpleasant feelings.

The next instruction is, "One understands exalted mind as exalted mind and unexalted mind as unexalted mind." An exalted mind, sometimes termed great mind, is based in one of the four Brahma Viharas, the divine abodes, the ways that wisdom manifests in the world. The divine abodes all have goodwill as their basis, wishing ourselves and others well.

Metta, friendliness, is the form goodwill takes by default, when there is no especially joyful, sad, or challenging atmosphere associated with the encounter. If we meet someone who is going through a hard time, goodwill takes the hue of compassion. We wish that their troubles might cease.

When there's something to celebrate, goodwill takes on the flavour of mudita, appreciative joy. And when we come across limitations or unskilfulness in ourselves or others, the response is equanimity—a tender understanding and acceptance of worldly imperfection.

On this side of liberation, we'll often miss the mark in relationship, believing we're acting with pure goodwill but in reality hooked by what's termed the near enemy of the Brahma Vihara. Friendliness is often mixed in with attachment. We're anxious to sustain the relationship, needing the other person's company, good humour, esteem. Often we don't even notice the subtle expectations we have of our friends. It's only when we feel let down that we realise how many strings we were attaching to our acts of friendship.

Pity can masquerade as compassion. We overblow the problem, underestimate the person's resources, forgetting that their essence has not been diminished by whatever misfortune has come their way. We think they can't cope without our help, but then get overwhelmed and feel burdened by responsibility.

The near enemy of mudita is excitement. We build too much out of the occasion, go to excess in our efforts to celebrate.

Finally, we can mistake indifference for equanimity. When some challenge comes up in our relationship we ignore it or shrug our shoulders rather than feel whatever disappointment, fear or anger may have been evoked, rather than work through those feelings to acceptance of the limitations of the relationship.

To get to know the exalted mind, we can practise metta with a degree of curiosity about our experience. You might experiment with the Buddha's guidance for metta practice: "One dwells suffusing one quarter with a mind filled with loving-kindness, then a second, then a third, and a fourth quarter. Thus one abides, suffusing the whole world—up, down and across, everywhere, all around—with a mind filled with loving-kindness, expanded, immeasurable, free from hatred and ill-will."

This doesn't mention any categories of people. In fact, it doesn't mention people at all, not even other beings. It puts aside the usual ideas of self and other that we use in metta practice. Instead, we use the concept of space and radiate loving-kindness up, down and across, everywhere, all around. Whatever this might involve at an ultimate level, we can also see this as an exercise in imagination. We're training ourselves to imagine a world pervaded with kindness. If we imagine this often enough, it will become our inner reality.

If and when metta seems stable, we can become curious about the mind that practises metta. The Buddha describes this as expanded, immeasurable. Can you sense how imagining space around you requires a mind that itself is spacious? The mind expands to meet the space it imagines.

But of course there will be challenges. Our imagination will reach limits where we cannot conceive of kindness. This shows us the unexalted mind.

At times the unexalted mind involves some form of ill-will. We project demons into the space around us instead of good wishes, becoming frightened if these demons seem angry, feeling they're preventing us from practising metta. Or we might just turn away from the difficulty as the mind shrinks into dullness.

At other times, the unexalted mind may involve greed. We project an exalted, saintly image of ourselves into the space around and then believe ourselves to be this great person with a big open heart. We might also get excited by all the good deeds we could do and all the people we could benefit, in which case restlessness forms the basis for the unexalted mind.

Alternatively, when our imagination reaches its limit, we start wondering what's going on. Is there really all this space around me? Can I really fill it with metta? In this case, the unexalted mind is based in the hindrance of doubt.

Because the sutta asks us to get to know both the exalted and unexalted mind, we don't have to think of the latter as a failure. In fact, the more curious we can get about it, the better. This positive attitude helps us work through whichever hindrance emerges.

The unexalted mind isn't necessarily based on any of the hindrances. We can also experience this as quite peaceful—the mind as simply knowing. There isn't active goodwill being generated, but there's no ill-will either.

The Buddha's pairing of exalted and unexalted mind helps us foster a beneficial relationship between these. At one moment we pervade the space around us with warm good wishes. The next moment we get curious about the mind that practises metta. We sense the expanded consciousness, the exalted mind. Quietly the image of space filled with metta disappears. For a while there is just the knowing mind. Awareness gradually lands on other aspects of the being who meditates—feelings, body, perception, unexalted mind. The memory of the vast metta-filled space fosters acceptance of our conditional nature, gratitude for the Dhamma which allows our being to learn its true nature.

Metta flows into the being with unexalted mind until it is ready once again to pervade the space around it with goodwill. Thus unexalted mind can provide a skilful break during metta practice, allowing us to rest and recharge our metta batteries.

The next instruction is to understand unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind and surpassed mind as surpassed mind. This is often taken as referring to jhana practices, where the highest jhana represents the unsurpassed mind. In his book *Satipatthana: A Practical Guide*, Analayo suggests that this can also be used in vipassana, asking ourselves: has the mind been developed to its maximum capacity for this particular meditation, or can we continue to develop?

The standard vipassana instructions don't explicitly include developing the mind. We are simply to register what we experience without judgment. Within non-judgmental awareness the mind develops of its own accord. The factors of enlightenment strengthen as the mind moves through hindrances towards greater clarity and ease. When the factors of enlightenment are strong, we have the unsurpassed mind.

There is mindfulness—we can maintain focus in present experience. We're not repeatedly getting lost in thought or falling asleep. There is concentration—we can focus on some aspect of experience and track this. There is equanimity—we're able to maintain an objective, balanced stance rather than being sucked in by desires, identified with views and thoughts. There is tranquility—preferring calm to excitement, we keep dropping desires and aversions. There is energy—we have the will and resources needed to maintain mindfulness, concentration, and the other factors of enlightenment. There is investigation—the mind is intelligent, curious, discerning. There is joy—we are interested in experience, glad to be learning the Dhamma.

This exercise in the Satipatthana Sutta asks us to look back into that well-balanced mind, to recognise it as unsurpassed. The word "unsurpassed" might make the exercise seem impossible, as if we should be looking into the mind of a saint. But we can interpret it to mean that awareness can't detect a flaw that can't be fixed.

If awareness detects grasping, the factors of enlightenment can step up to put this right. For example, we could shift focus, let attention rest in the breath or other neutral, calming sensations. Energy could be stepped up a gear in order to resist the pull of desire, the push of aversion. Mindfulness could become more alert to the fading away of experience, moment after moment, which helps us acknowledge the futility of grasping. Equanimity might draw attention back from detail to see the larger picture. These adjustments happen naturally, organically, without forcing. The factors work together as a team to restore their formation.

Bhante's wild geese analogy is very useful here. At times their V-shaped formation gets disturbed—some flying too fast, others going too slow. But then the instinct for co-ordination comes to the fore. Various birds come forward, others fall back, until order is restored. The flock needs to get to their destination, and each individual is willing to fall into line with that overriding objective.

In the same way, the factors of enlightenment get scattered—for example, when we get too curious and fall prey to the desire to know and understand experience more clearly. Unwittingly, we start forcing our agenda, put ourselves under pressure to hurry towards enlightenment. This is the surpassed mind. But mindfulness detects the problem, and then the adjustments start: changing focus, widening attention, noticing that everything is always slipping away, fading out. Our overriding objective is to maintain the objective observer stance, and so traits like curiosity and even tranquility take a back seat as the mind steadies itself to resist the pull of grasping.

If order can be restored—if we again sense awareness brushing against experience rather than digging in, shaping it—then we can again reflect that the mind at this moment is unsurpassed. It knows how to maintain its own objectivity.

Analayo describes the unsurpassed mind as one which can continue to develop. For example, we can use the unsurpassed mind to develop one of the factors of enlightenment, or a virtue like patience. Often we're developing wisdom. We're seeing that sensations and feelings, moods and emotions, thoughts and images—all experience—arises and passes away. That any attempt to cling brings dukkha. In other words, we're learning about the three characteristics of existence: anicca, dukkha, anatta. Transience, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

But there comes a stage when we can no longer sustain equanimity. The hindrances are threatening to overpower us, and we sense it best to draw the meditation to a close. Here we have an example of the surpassed mind—one which, using Analayo's description, cannot be further developed.

We've run out of meditative steam and need to let daily life recharge our batteries. What I often do here is make the determination to wait until there is equanimity in the movement from sitting to standing. For as long as I feel impatience, the desire to plunge straight into daily life, I keep relaxing, allowing that desire to burn off, reminding myself that this is the surpassed mind—the mind that has reached its limit of development—a worthy satipatthana for mindfulness.

Aversions and judgments may emerge, but again I note these, reminding myself that this surpassed mind is what I have to work with in daily life, so I might as well make friends with it. At some stage I notice the mind readying itself to stand, the body starting to sway, or the eyes beginning to open. Until it happens, I never know how the body will actually do the business of standing up. These movements are sensed as an equanimous follow-on to the earlier decision to bring the meditation to a close.

These final minutes of meditation are an exercise in making peace with limitations, accepting that the mind has done its job and cannot be further developed in this particular setting. The transition back into daily life is wiser and more peaceful as a result. Knowing our limitations is a great asset in life—knowing when we need to stop pushing ourselves to achieve some goal, when we need to step back, rest, recharge our batteries.

The label "surpassed mind" can also help us make peace with the mental limitations we detect in daily life. For example, when we sense the mind as dull or stuck or lazy, we might not even have enough energy to work out which of the hindrances is overpowering us. We just know we're not in the most wholesome condition. The phrase "surpassed mind" lets us put all such states into a box, helps us see them objectively, and draws out the awareness which can then start to tease some wisdom out of the situation.

The next pairing is between the concentrated and unconcentrated mind. These refer to the two levels of concentration we encounter in vipassana, termed vitakka and vicara in Pali. Vitakka is described as applied thought. Here we're making an effort to focus the mind. We could be trying to follow the breath, but images and fantasies keep intruding, and we have to keep reminding ourselves of our goal. The notes "rising, falling" provide that reminder, like a lasso we throw around our scattered mind, drawing it back home.

The image of a bee seeking nectar from a flower is also used. The flower is bobbing around in the breeze while the bee hovers a few inches away, tracking the flower to and fro, waiting for the exact moment to alight. When that opportunity comes, we have vicara, described as sustained thought. This is a deeper, more restful level of concentration. Just as the bee is now being carried about by the flower, no longer needing to hover and track, we are being carried along by sensations and feelings, no longer needing any effort to maintain mindfulness.

When we're following this particular exercise on the contemplation of mind, we're not so much trying to focus attention on the breath or other object as detecting whether or not we're focused. Are we putting some effort into containing images and thoughts, gathering them in? Or is the mind resting, being carried along by present experience?

This is especially useful if we sense poor concentration as a problem in meditation, feeling that we're failing because we don't have good concentration. It takes the pressure off, as it no longer matters what the level of concentration is—only that we know whether we have to make an effort or whether we're relaxing.

There are a number of other benefits to this exercise. One is that when we get interested in the unconcentrated mind, we find we can now focus on this. So the lack of concentration actually leads to concentration. What I find is that the unconcentrated mind is divided. One desire chases a certain stream of thought, while another desire wants to chase another. The bee is hovering around a big bunch of flowers, unable to decide which to alight upon. The general feeling of division is unpleasant, aversive, and thus we easily link this state with a sense of failure. Instead, we should simply recognise it as unconcentrated mind and see it as a worthy satipatthana exercise. A level of equanimity and tranquility develops, allowing us to make peace with the tendency towards restlessness and getting scattered.

Focusing on the concentrated mind, we sense the pleasure of tranquility. Of course, there is the danger of identification with this pleasant feeling, thinking "I am calm," and then grasping at the feeling. So here we are seeing the opposite to restlessness—the mind closing up within a pleasant haze, growing dull and lethargic. The bee has landed on the flower but is sucking it dry. You do sometimes see a bee going to sleep on a flower, and in the same way we can actually lose consciousness when the mind is very concentrated. We're still sitting upright but not registering anything consciously.

Curiosity about the concentrated and unconcentrated mind prevents this closure, and paradoxically I find I can actually start looking forward to losing concentration. I'm curious to discover what will be lost when concentration moves back to vitakka. What I sometimes find is the mind moving from subjectivity to objectivity. If you remember back to the sutta on the destruction of craving, the Buddha asks us to study the relationship between "this" and "that." The concentrated mind, I find, is focusing on what it terms "this," thinking of sensations and feelings as subjective—which is to be expected, as the feeling of a concentrated mind is pleasant. So we tend to think of this experience as me and mine.

As concentration weakens, we notice unpleasant feelings which we label as "that," as external, objective. Now we sense a division between the observer and the object. If there is enough equanimity, we can then focus more closely on the unpleasant sensations, and concentration returns.

We're again in the realm of subjectivity, but making peace with unpleasant feelings that we would normally externalise as some storyline about how badly the world treats us. The bee has alighted again, but on a thorny flower, needing constant encouragement not to fly off, to keep detecting the nectar on offer within the pain.

Thus, the pairing of concentrated and unconcentrated mind can develop into a very helpful relationship, where the unconcentrated mind is recognised as an opportunity to expand our mental horizons, to make peace with a world that doesn't satisfy. Rob Burbea, for many years the resident teacher at Gaia House, has a series of dharma talks titled "In Praise of Restlessness," which I find very inspiring. He identifies the danger of overvaluing tranquillity so that we ignore anything that disturbs concentration. He uses Greek mythology to inspire us to value instead the mind that lacks tranquillity, that struggles with concentration, seeing this as a valiant, heroic attempt to embrace the tragic, crazy world with all its contradictions.

The final pairing in this section of the sutta is between the liberated and unliberated mind. Full liberation will only come at the moment of enlightenment, but the Buddha obviously wants us to practise this exercise before then. Analayo suggests we interpret the liberated mind as one which is liberated from the view of self.

Our usual effort in vipassana is to be the objective observer, not interfering in any way, just observing. Bhante uses the analogy of a sailor on lookout duty. The sailor climbs up the mast to the crow's nest, a lookout post giving a broad overview of the ship and its surrounds. Without this lookout, the ship could strike rocks or run unprepared into a storm. In the same way, our position as objective observer lets us spot the telltale signs of desire, aversion, grasping. Instead of getting caught up in these, mindfulness lets us steer safely through the storm.

Here we have the unsurpassed mind. The factors of enlightenment are strong. However, we are identifying as the observer, and to that extent bound up in the dukkha which comes with identification. We usually aren't aware of this attachment until we lose the observer position. As far as we know, we're just watching equanimously, not interfering. But when thoughts begin to get sticky again, we realise we're slipping from our lofty perch on the crow's nest, falling into the bedlam we've been watching from above.

Mindfulness of the dukkha which accompanies this fall from grace helps us lose attachment to the state of objective observer. It becomes easier to see the tough times—when we get caught up and identified with thoughts and emotions—as opportunities to develop compassion for our unenlightened condition.

At times, when the factors are strong and we're in our crow's nest observing objectively, the sense of ourselves as observer can simply disappear. There are sensations and feelings, perceptions and mental states, but these are just happening of their own accord. They no longer seem to be happening to me. There's no central reference point for it all.

When we say that the sense of self disappears, this sounds like a form of death. But the disappearance is quiet, undramatic. It's not that there's a long struggle and we eventually surrender. It happens at times when we're not struggling, just watching. The sense of self is simply a mental construction, a perspective we're putting on experience using our cognitive abilities. Cognition puts a shape on the millions of sensations, feelings—what we could call atoms of experience—registering each moment. It helps slow things down mentally, makes it all more manageable.

One of the ways we frame experience is through the concept of self. We identify some of the atoms as me or mine, and some as yours or his or some other way outside ourselves. But this distinction is learned. As a baby we weren't able to do this, so it's not essential to life. It takes effort to frame experience like this, although the process is so habitual we don't notice that it's actually voluntary. We're willing ourselves to see the world as either self or other.

At times in meditation the mind relaxes, stops making that effort, and the sense of self quietly disappears. This is the liberated mind, the experience of not-self, anattā. Sensations, feelings and so on continue to appear, but we stop dividing these into boxes of mine or not mine. It's a joyful experience. We've dropped the burden of thinking of ourselves as someone with a future and a past, with so many roles and responsibilities to uphold. In fact, there's seldom any desire to think. We're so riveted by present experience. Bhante uses the analogy of a baby who's so fascinated by what they're seeing that the jaw drops. They stare open-mouthed at the world in a state of total wonder.

Although we probably won't want to think, the Buddha wants us to reflect that we are experiencing a mind that has been liberated from the view of self. This can actually be a challenge, as the absence of self may not be immediately apparent. We might not be able to work out what's happening. We just know we're seeing things differently. Experience is felt more intensely. There's no interest in anything but present experience. But other than that, everything continues normally.

In her book *The Experience of No Self*, Bernadette Roberts describes how she knew something had changed during a particular meditation, but couldn't work out what it was.

She went about her daily business—she was a mother with teenage children—for a few days, until she suddenly realized that her sense of self had dropped away.

Although the absence of self does not immediately trouble us, reflecting on this may trouble us. We fear what we do not understand, and thus the very uptight self might emerge, wanting to know what this implies. How can I be absent? How can the world be surviving without me? A multitude of contradictory thoughts may surface. Rather than follow these, we should simply reflect that this is the unliberated mind and feel the push and pull of desire and aversion underlying our fears and doubts.

As we work mindfully through our fear of anattā, we start to appreciate the joy and freedom of this state, trusting that nothing essential is lost when we stop framing experience in terms of I, me, mine. At times we may be able to study the transition from liberated to unliberated mind, or vice versa. We see the effort of will that goes into framing experience in terms of self. We notice the relaxation as we stop.

We might think that the liberated mind is always superior to the unliberated mind. But on this side of enlightenment, anyhow, it is essential to be able to construct a sense of self at times. For example, we can learn to bring forth a sense of self that attaches firmly to notions of restraint in order to resist desires based in greed, hatred, and delusion. When that work is done, our knowledge of the liberated mind helps us let go of attachment to the self who has just rescued us from this latest peril.

In summary, then, this section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta gives us five ways of probing the mind. We ask whether it's contracted—meaning dull and lethargic—or distracted and restless. We ask whether or not it's in an exalted state of goodwill. We ask whether it's unsurpassed, meaning it can be developed further, or surpassed, having reached its limit for this session. We ask whether it's concentrated—has the bee landed on the flower, or is it hovering about, trying to track a flower that's bobbing about in the breeze? The final exercise is to ask whether the mind has been liberated from the sense of self, or whether we're identified as the observer.

For each pairing we have the refrain, three variations on the basic exercise. First, we have the option to practice externally, to notice these mind states in others. When we've detected that our mind is now exalted, we can reflect that others experience the exalted mind. And when we move to the unexalted state, we can reflect that others experience an unexalted mind. We can do this for all of the five pairings. Realizing that these states are part of the general human condition will loosen attachment, help us feel less ashamed of what we deem the less worthy states, less proud of those we judge as terrif-

ic achievements. It also strengthens our goodwill and respect for others when we reflect that they too can experience states like exalted mind, unsurpassed mind, and liberated mind.

The second option is to notice that these states arise and pass away. Again, this helps us let go of attachment. We might feel mightily proud of an unsurpassed mind. But if we reflect that this wasn't here a few minutes ago, we might also realize that this is just a temporary visitor. We should enjoy it while it's here, but not be too surprised when it fades away.

The final option is simply to note "there is mind." We're no longer trying to identify whether the mind is concentrated or surpassed or in any of the other states. This final option requires no effort whatsoever beyond focusing on the mind, the knowing aspect of experience. We could use the Mahasi note—knowing, knowing—to help maintain focus. The mind may pass through many of the states described: exalted, non-exalted, contracted, distracted. We're letting all this happen quite naturally, organically. However, we're not making the effort to note exactly which state the mind is in. We're getting to know the mind intuitively, rather than by deliberate reflection. This is actually our normal vipassanā practice, except that we're focusing on the mind, the knowing of experience, rather than our more usual focus on sensations and feelings.

Let's finish with a verse from the Dhammapada:

Mind is the forerunner of all evil. Speak or act with wicked mind, then suffering follows, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox. Mind is the forerunner of all good. Speak or act with pure mind, then happiness follows, even as the shadow that never leaves.

CHAPTER 33

Building a Raft to Cross the Floods of Sensuality and Views

Noirin Sheahan · 39 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan presents the Buddha's teaching of the raft as a vivid metaphor for spiritual practice in challenging circumstances. Drawing from the Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22), she explains how the four floods—sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance—sweep us away from spiritual stability, and how we can construct makeshift rafts from the Noble Eightfold Path to reach safety.

The teaching offers practical guidance for working with difficult emotions and situations both in meditation and daily life. Noirin provides detailed examples of how to apply mindfulness, right speech, and the brahmavihāra when caught in heated debates or struggling with low moods during retreat. She emphasizes that we don't need to be spiritual experts to begin practice—we simply gather whatever 'grass, twigs, and branches' of Dhamma understanding we possess.

The talk beautifully illustrates how temporary periods of ease in practice represent reaching the 'far shore,' while our identification with body, personality, and life story keeps us trapped on the 'perilous near shore.' Noirin's teaching is both deeply practical and inspiring, showing how even our most undignified spiritual struggles can become opportunities for liberation when approached with wisdom and compassion.

Last night, we spoke of the spiritual faculties, which are the strengths that develop from our spiritual practice and which help us combat difficulties in formal meditation and daily life. The teaching known as The Raft is related to this theme, and that's what I'd like to talk about tonight.

While the spiritual faculties help us reflect on and value the strengths we're building up, the teaching on the raft suggests how to put these to work in tricky situations. So it's a different perspective. In fact, all the Buddha's teachings are saying the same thing from slightly different perspectives. This one tackles the dynamic and powerful challenges we come across in life and gives us a vivid and quite undignified image for how we might somehow scrabble our way through.

The Sutta describes someone following a path that leads to a shore that is perilous and risky, owing to a great flood of water. Across the water he sees another shore where the ground is safe and secure. The Buddha then says, "The thought would occur to him:

What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches and leaves, and having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore, independence on the raft, making an effort with my hands and feet?" So he builds the raft and makes it to the other shore.

Then there is the question of what to do with the raft. He's tempted to take it with him, but according to the Buddha, that's a mistake. After pondering the question for a while, he has the thought, "Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?" That, according to the Buddha, is the right decision.

In another Sutta, the various symbols are explained. The great expanse of water stands for the fourfold flood. The raft stands for the noble eightfold path. The near shore stands for self-identity while the far shore stands for unbinding.

Identifying with our normal limited sense of self is our problem on the near shore. When we believe we're confined within our body and mind, and expressed by a personality and described in our life story, then we're on perilous ground. At any moment our body can fall ill or die. Our personality can let us down when we get a shock or get depressed, and can wither away altogether through Alzheimer's or other diseases. We might suffer some calamity which makes a mockery of all we achieved and so our personal story becomes one of failure.

On the far shore we know we are not confined within our body, mind, personality or life history. So we can look on our physical, mental or social troubles with tender compassion but without distress. The ultimate unbinding happens when we're fully enlightened. But for the moment, we can think of the far shore as those temporary periods of ease in our practice, when we've worked our way through some hindrance and are now at ease.

To get to the far shore, we have to cross the expanse of water, the fourfold flood. In essence, these are the hindrances again, but from a different perspective. The hindrances describe the energetic manifestation of our troubles, without reference to any background story that may be prompting desire, aversion, restlessness, etc. This is an especially useful way to view these in meditation, where we're looking at moment-to-moment experience.

The floods describe these same troubles but in broader terms rather than momentary energies. They describe what we identify with in life. Thus, the floods are related to the *khandas*, and the first flood, termed the flood of sensuality, overlaps with the first *khandha*, termed the body.

The *khandhas* describe our identities in terms that encourage us to tease things out at the deep level we can sometimes achieve within the steady focus of *vipassanā*. It's often termed a deconstruction of our sense of self. This microscopic focus is powerful, but can seem puzzling or academic from our normal perspective. In order to facilitate our practice at times when we don't have so much calm objectivity, we have the image of a fourfold flood as a way to tease out the problems that come from identifying with aspects of our life.

The first three are the floods of sensuality, becoming and views. Underlying these three, we have the fourth one, the flood of ignorance.

We get swept away by the flood of sensuality whenever we indulge sense pleasure mindlessly, whether it be for food, sex, music, material goods, intoxicants, whatever the material world can offer by way of pleasure and escapism. This flood also drowns us when we are upset by the unattractive nature of the material world. Hunger, thirst and physical pain are our primary fears here, but we also deplore noise, ugliness, stinks and so on.

We might not think of ourselves as sensual. Perhaps we're more cerebral, easily absorbed by computers or books or abstract ideas, but not very interested in food or music or sex or whether the house is painted red or green or what the wallpaper looks like. Thus, we might think that sensuality is one flood we don't have to worry about. But our cerebral function depends on being warm and healthy and having food to eat. If we're cold or hungry, we won't be able to think straight or with any pleasure. It's only when we get a meal inside us and are tucked up in front of a warm fire that we'll feel like ourselves again, able to engage happily with our book or computer.

So even if we don't take much notice of sense pleasures, we're depending on them to let our minds pursue their cerebral pleasures and there inform that all-important sense of me. As such, we're at risk from the floods of sensuality whenever our basic needs for food and warmth are not met, when any of our senses fail or when our body is wracked with pain.

The next flood, termed becoming, sweeps us away when we identify with our personal history and its projection into the future. It seems so obvious that we were the child we remember from our school days and that we will be the older person who will bear our name and passport tomorrow. In the steady gaze of *vipassanā*, this illusion can sometimes be seen through. We sense a mass of changing sensations, thoughts, moods, but no central control headquarters to call me.

But the belief in ourselves as a personal identity has been taken for granted throughout our lives and forms the basis for almost all our thoughts. And so the illusion of self returns again and again, both on and off the cushion. We are then prey to floods of regret for the past as well as worry about the future. How will I get everything done? Will I succeed in my career? Will people respect me? Does anyone love me?

That's not to say we can ignore our personal history and its likely course in the future. Life is a precious opportunity for liberation and unless we look after the unenlightened person we appear to be just now, we won't be able to liberate that person from suffering. That can mean looking after our career, our good name, our family and so on. The raft formed from the *anattā* perspective lets us do all this without worrying and obsessing over our future or regretting our past.

Another flood comes when we attach to views and opinions. How many of us can have a completely calm, rational discussion about politics or religion, abortion or euthanasia? If we've no opinion, that makes it easy. But perhaps we've chosen non-committal as a way of avoiding hurt if our views were rejected. And even if we can ignore these somewhat abstract questions, we'll probably have a cherished opinion on how to hang wallpaper or how to cook the best Christmas pudding. So the flood can sweep us away when someone dismisses our opinions on these matters and we feel small, hurt and disrespected.

Finally, and underlying all of these, we have the flood of ignorance. That term is often used insultingly, but here it means that we don't know how to make ourselves happy. Happiness comes when we live from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. While ignorance means that we don't fully understand these, so we're looking for happiness in all the wrong places. We're assuming the next romance will make us happy or becoming a millionaire. That should do the trick. Basically, we get swept away by the first three floods because we're already drifting in the flood of ignorance.

It's worth reminding ourselves that we don't have to know everything in order to be free from suffering. We only have to understand the four noble truths. We can be quite ignorant about biology, music and gardening and still be perfectly happy. We might not know the best way to organise people or the best decisions to make in our life.

The Buddha's first sermon was a complete failure. The person walked away after the Buddha's attempt to describe his enlightened state. So the Buddha wasn't omniscient. He could make mistakes. He had to experiment and see what worked. The only mistake he could never make after enlightenment was to let desire cause suffering.

Unlike the Buddha, here we are on our perilous shoreline. One moment it feels secure, the next it's collapsing like quicksand. The water in front of us is treacherous. But in the distance we see another shore that's stable and secure. This gives us the spark of faith we need to get started. It gets us looking around for materials that could make a raft.

And to be honest, they don't look promising. Grass and twigs and branches and leaves. The grass I can only imagine is long reed-like stems that could be used to bind twigs and branches together. Flimsy, makeshift, rickety fragile. That is the image the Buddha is giving us for our raft. It takes courage to set out at all. This means that we don't have to be experts before we start practising. We just use whatever bits of information or skill we have and get stuck in.

And don't expect the ride to be easy. It's not a cruise ship we're on. It's a very flimsy raft. We're spread-eagled on it, just barely clear of the floodwaters, paddling through these using our hands and feet. I think this is a great image to console us for the very unedifying picture we get of ourselves as we scramble our Dharma practice together in the midst of a crisis.

At times we'll probably lose sight of the far shore. To tell us whether we're still going the right direction, we have another water metaphor the Buddha gives for spiritual practice: swimming upstream. We're always going against the current of the floods, against the habitual desires of our conditioning. Whatever we don't want to do, that's what we need to do. If we want to gobble our dinner, we need to slow down. If we want to sink into despair, that's when we need to find some reason to be hopeful. Even when we can't see where we're heading, we can detect the direction that desire is sweeping us and work against that strong current.

Somehow we make it across. We're on that wonderful beach, safe and sound. Our little raft has done its job. We're naturally delighted with it. We might also be attached to it, thinking we might need it again, for who knows what the next shoreline will look like. And we might be justifiably proud of it and want it as a trophy, to show people how clever we were in getting across the stormy sea. So we're tempted to hoist it on our shoulder and take it with us on our journey. But according to the Buddha, this isn't wise. We're to leave our beloved raft behind.

This tells us that we can't cling to any aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. Just because we practiced right speech in a tricky situation, we shouldn't think of ourselves as experts. It is so tempting to think, okay, I've learned that lesson, I'll never make that

mistake again. But then to our utter dismay, we fall back into the same trap. The conditioning that pulls us into the floods goes deep and we have to relearn the Dharma, make a new raft in each new situation.

But it's also fair to say that we get better at finding materials for our raft and more skilled in binding these together, more sensitive to the flow of the current. Also our muscles develop so we can paddle more vigorously. And we gain more and more confidence that we will, at some stage, make it to the other shore. So we're willing to venture out in ever more skimpy rafts.

Let's look at a practical example. Suppose you had a really rough morning's meditation here at Satipanya. You've lost any confidence you ever had regarding meditation. All morning your mind kept wandering. By the 11 a.m. meditation you were totally fed up. Again and again you woke up to find yourself in the middle of a long moan about how hopeless things are. When the bell goes for lunch, you just want to gobble it all up and dive into bed for an hour.

What floods are at work here? We're unhappy and don't know how to make ourselves happy. That summarises our basic problem in life. Unhappiness at base stems from not understanding the Four Noble Truths. So we're adrift in the flood of ignorance. Lunch and bed represent sense pleasures. So the flood of sensuality is flowing over the flood of ignorance. And with a bit of luck, the pleasures of food and being stretched out on a warm bed will let us forget our troubles for a while.

But at what cost do we enter this flood? One episode of laziness might not do too much harm. But the trouble is that the next time you're feeling low, you'll want to gobble your lunch twice as fast and sleep for twice as long. If this goes on, then pretty soon you won't return for the afternoon shift at all. And then you'll feel even more rotten and depressed. Basically, the current starts off gently, but pulls us into ever faster currents that sweep us further and further from the shore.

So where can we find materials for our raft? First and foremost, we have mindfulness. We can acknowledge that we're fed up and miserable. Sounds easy, but the temptation to ignore our moods can be strong. We need a steady practice to work mindfully with bad moods such as this.

To start making a raft, you could resolve to spend a few minutes in mindful acknowledgement of the bad mood. In theory, this is what you've been doing all morning, but sometimes we lose sight of the broader picture in our effort to still the mind in medita-

tion. As we relax when the bell goes, and as we're walking toward the lunchroom, that broader awareness might actually be the first real acknowledgement of how low your mood has descended.

Acknowledging the bad humour changes the situation radically and with this broader awareness it is worth re-entering the gaze of *vipassanā* for another few minutes. You could do this while sitting at table after serving yourself your lunch, noting the mood and feeling the bodily sensations associated with it. Even one minute will make a huge difference. Although you might still feel low, you will feel much better for having taken the time and trouble to acknowledge the mood mindfully. You might even make it all the way to the far shore and feel hopeful about your meditation practice again.

Vipassanā practice will always make a really good raft. But suppose you can't muster the energy for this. Just like it was doing all morning, your mind gets sucked into negative thoughts the moment you decide to do a minute's practice at the dining room table. Instead of *vipassanā*, you could choose mindful eating as the framework for your raft, noting all the physical sensations.

For extra buoyancy, you could pick up some *mettā*. You could wish yourself well as you cut up a potato. As you're chewing this, you can wish that the meal will cheer you up. If your mood lightens, you could add in *muditā*, appreciating the meal and congratulating yourself for having looked after yourself well in a tricky situation.

Now suppose wishing ourselves well seems forced and contrived and puts us in even worse humour. In that case, compassion could be more appropriate, starting off by acknowledging that we're having a really bad time. It often helps to express sympathy with a gesture, perhaps a hand on the heart. The phrase, "may I be free from suffering," or "may I be free from anger and ill will," could feel more congruent than *mettā* good wishes. This is to work very tenderly with ourselves. If we can also be patient, not expecting ourselves to cheer up anytime soon, we can be assured that this is a very genuine part of our spiritual practice.

But if it's one of those times when we're too low or fed up for self-compassion, we could try to pick up some equanimity for our raft with a phrase like, "may I not make things worse for myself?"

If that stems the flow of negativity for a moment, we could add some other bits of wisdom. A phrase like "this too will pass" reminds us of *anicca*. No matter how we decide to work with bad humour, we've avoided the temptation to gobble and dive into bed. So we're buoying up our raft with renunciation.

When the Buddha first thought of a life of renunciation, he noticed, "my heart did not leap up with joy." We find it much easier to be enthusiastic about *mettā*, compassion, mindfulness and so on than renunciation. Deferring pleasure isn't easy, especially as we've no control over when and if any rewards will come through. But I'm sure you'll agree that you would feel immeasurably better for having worked mindfully with a bad humour than if you'd given in to all its demands.

Although the thought of renunciation doesn't make our hearts leap with joy, the practice of it brings a freedom. We realise we don't have to be controlled by our moods or obsessions. Such a relief. A soupsong of *Nibbāna*.

But if the flood of sensuality sweeps us off our feet and we're already gobbling our dinner, we could try making a supreme effort and note "indulging, indulging." Can we feel any of the pleasure this is giving? If so, can we focus on this as we eat? You could call it mindful gobbling. A rickety raft for sure, but if it keeps us present, it's doing its job.

It's also possible that when we note "indulging, indulging," we are immediately recaptured by our negativity. We remember our bad humour and now there might be a good dollop of shame added to this as well. Shame can be used skilfully because it tells us we're going astray. We've been reacting, indulging in food as a means of escape. Although we might feel even worse after noting indulgence, that very discomfort can prompt us to look around for a few materials to start making a raft. It's never too late to start. Even if we're on the last bite, any of the options suggested above are still available, though we might now have to start with self-forgiveness and the resolve that we can mend our ways.

These are the times that it really helps to remember the image of being spread-eagled on a rickety raft. We don't have to look good to practice the *Dhamma*. In fact, the shame of knowing we've been acting unskilfully is always a good place to start building a raft.

I know one man who had earlier in life suffered from alcoholism. After one bad bout he was nursing a hangover and sitting in the kitchen feeling really miserable. He was watching his wife doing some housework, too sick and depressed to offer any help. As she passed him by, she gave him a look of total disgust. He had the thought, "you're right, I am a louse, but I can do better." He gave up drinking completely from that moment, went on to form and run a very successful business, and when I met him years later, he was regularly going to ten-day Vipassanā retreats. When we register guilt or

shame mindfully, they can stir us to find a way to mend our ways. No matter how many break periods we've wasted gobbling and snoring, we can choose the thought, "I can do better than this," and make faith the first component of our raft.

Let's now look at a practical example of the flood of views. Suppose we've got ourselves into a heated debate about the refugee crisis. Our adversary is fiercely arguing for border closures while we are stoutly defending the refugees' rights to asylum. We're feeling threatened by the situation and getting agitated. It's a complex situation. On the one hand, we're expressing compassion for refugees, so we're developing one of the *Brahmavihāra*. On the other hand, we're in danger of ill will.

Mindfulness would be the main material to frame our raft. Unless we're aware of the anger rising within us, we could easily snap at our opponent, insult them, scorn their lack of compassion or taunt them with sarcastic comments. If we're a clever debater, we could find ways to ridicule their arguments and belittle them, unconscious of the irony that we're using cruel words to argue for compassion. If we're not good at debate, we could find ourselves on the receiving end of cruelty. If we take their scorn to heart and let it wreck our confidence, we might end up sowing seeds of enmity, unable to think well of that person again. We'll have been carried far away by the floods without any awareness of this, insisting that we're doing the right thing, standing up for the rights of refugees.

With mindfulness, we'll feel and acknowledge anger and be aware of the floods threatening us. Once we have the frame of mindfulness in place, the most useful material for this particular raft would be right speech. Here's the definition the Buddha gives: "And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. This is called right speech."

In another teaching he puts it in positive terms: "It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of goodwill."

We're not likely to be able to sift every word through the Buddha's filters while we're in the middle of a heated argument. But the more often we reflect on these lists and let them influence our speech in less conflicting situations, the more easily we'll be able to attach right speech to our raft when we really need it.

So let's see how our communication is measuring up to the Buddha's standards in this particular situation. We're certainly not engaged in idle chatter. Our intention is beneficial and we're not using divisive speech. So far so good. Hopefully also we're being truthful, though this will be compromised if we're exaggerating facts and figures to score our point.

Another consideration, according to the Buddha, is whether our speech is timely. If we can see that our adversary is completely closed to our point of view, then our words are a waste of time. All we're doing is letting that person sow their own seeds of hatred, as well as putting ourselves in danger of the flood of views. Out of compassion for self and other, we should put an end to the argument.

We also need to ask ourselves whether we're speaking with a mind of goodwill, and whether our words are gentle or harsh. These are obviously related. If we're speaking with goodwill, we won't be shouting or letting sarcastic or insulting remarks slip out. At times we might believe we're speaking with goodwill, unaware of how anger has escalated in the heat of the moment. If we hear ourselves using harsh words or a scornful tone, we have the feedback we need to acknowledge that anger is getting the better of us. In that case, we have to scrabble around to find a way of binding the raft together again.

One of the *Brahmavihāra* might do the trick. *Upekkhā* is often the most practical place to start, with a wish such as "may I not do harm on account of my anger." If that steadies the raft, you could add a dash of *mettā*, for example, "may this conversation be beneficial to us both."

It's tough work though, trying to bind a rickety raft together on stormy waters. So should we withdraw from the conversation as soon as we feel anger rising? That depends on how well we can trust ourselves to work with anger in a conflict such as this. If we're mindful of anger, we're not being controlled by it. We can feel angry but maintain an attitude of no harm or even of goodwill. This is the great benefit of working with the difficult person in our *mettā* practice. So long as we can maintain the no harm attitude, we can safely continue to argue our case no matter what fury might be firing through our veins.

In fact, engaging with the argument will be an excellent spiritual practice. We're mindfully watching anger and letting it transform into compassion, which is hard enough to do on the cushion, never mind in a social situation. If we can somehow make it to the other shore, we should give ourselves a major *sādhu* for steering our raft through such a flood.

Mindfulness and right speech are the primary materials we need when the flood of views threatens. It can also help to remember the Buddha's usual method of engaging people in debate. He would listen to their views carefully and then question them, drawing them out so that they eventually saw the weakness in their argument. Only then would he give his own view. If we could use this model, we would be doing a lot more listening than we usually do during a heated argument. This will also help keep us calm and give us a much better chance of controlling any anger. In order to ask useful questions, we will have to consider their point of view seriously, which in itself is an act of *mettā*.

You might rarely get into controversial discussions like this. Perhaps you don't have strong views on many matters. Those of us in this category might therefore think that at least we're free from the flood of views. But if someone bullies us, it's hard to resist the view that they are horrid and cruel. Or if our partner repeatedly omits to do their share of housework, we'd probably be rehashing thoughts like "he's so mean and lazy," or "she's so thoughtless." These views can bind us, and so we might never appreciate how much attention our partner pays to the children, for example.

If we're sharing responsibility for a project, it's easy to get into arguments about how things ought to be done, convinced that our view is right. Even if we don't have strong political or religious views, we have opinions on almost everything we do. And if someone disagrees with these, we'll feel angry, hurt or threatened. Thus all of us, even the meek and mild, are at risk from the flood of views.

You can explore this flood here on retreat. Even though we're not talking out loud, how many arguments do we have in our heads, insisting over and over again how right we are and how wrong our imaginary adversary is? To make a raft, we use body awareness. Feeling the sensations generated by all those strident thoughts, we paddle our way through the flood. The far shore might come into view as a thought like "what does it really matter who's right or wrong" slips through the turmoil.

The more often we negotiate our way through this flood in Vipassanā, the more easily we make a raft when the tsunami comes our way in a heated conversation during daily life.

Another very good practice to prepare us for this flood is to reflect on the Buddha's list for right speech and ask ourselves whether we often transgress these unwittingly. Idle or untimely speech would be a danger for many of us. This doesn't mean we should only speak when we have something really important to say. The Buddha was always happy to exchange pleasantries. These are just a socially acceptable way of saying "may you be well and happy." So they are a *mettā* practice and to be cherished.

But conversations easily fall into moaning about our woes or giving out about third parties. In that case, we're being swept away by the flood of views. Our moans reflect the view that the world should not have done this to me or that the third party should have behaved differently. For example, "the car broke down and I had to get it towed away, cost me £300 and then my boss decides to dock me an hour's pay for being late."

If that's said mindfully, as a factual statement, or with clarity in our distress and need for sympathy, then no problem. We need to be able to tell others our bad news. It's part of the way we help each other to deal with the truth of *dukkha*. But if we're spitting the words out in anger and injecting swear words about our boss and the car, then we're caught in the flood, proclaiming our view of how rotten the world is and especially our rotten car and boss. We're not so much looking for sympathy, more interested in having our view of the rotten world confirmed.

Suppose we've spat out that much and then suddenly remember our *Dhamma* practice. We need to start building a raft pronto. Mindfulness would be the best start, acknowledging anger. We then need to acknowledge this to whoever we've been talking to and apologise for having dumped our bad temper on them. This would be an example of right speech. The apology relieves some of the burden we've placed on them. So it is beneficial speech. All of this might have calmed us enough for some self-compassion, acknowledging in a sympathetic way how rotten we feel. *Upekkhā*-style good wishes such as "may I take care of myself wisely" would help us bear the burden until our anger dissipates.

In general, right speech is an important aspect of any raft to take us across the flood of views, as this flood will be at its swiftest when we're expressing our views to another person. The more often we take care to practice right speech in simple situations when we're not threatened by the flood, the easier it will be for us to build our raft when we need it.

We'll continue with this teaching on the raft tomorrow night and give some examples of working with the other floods. For the moment, let's remind ourselves that we don't have to despair when we find ourselves in a tantrum and acting as if we'd never done a moment's mindfulness practice in our lives. The moment we see our tantrum is the moment to start looking around for any branches or twigs that could make a raft. It's never too late to start.

The present moment never condemns us or shuts us out from its infinite store of wisdom and compassion. May this reflection help us build and trust our rickety rafts and paddle them swiftly to the far shores.

CHAPTER 34

Building a Raft to Cross the Floods of Becoming and Ignorance

Noirin Sheahan · 42 min

In this continuation of teachings on the Buddha's famous raft simile, Nóirín Sheahan examines the floods of becoming (bhava) and ignorance (avijjā) that sweep us away from our true freedom. The flood of becoming relates to our identification with roles—parent, teacher, professional—and our projection of self into the future. Through vivid examples, including a challenging classroom scenario, she demonstrates how to construct a raft from mindfulness, calm, mettā, equanimity, and moral resolve when our identity feels threatened.

The talk delves into the subtler flood of ignorance, which underlies all suffering and manifests as our fundamental confusion about how to find lasting happiness. Even in quiet moments when external conditions for peace are present, we experience restlessness and unease. Sheahan explains how the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path serve as our raft through this deepest flood, requiring us to fully understand dukkha and release the desires that cause it.

Particularly valuable is the teaching on what to do upon reaching the far shore—the Buddha's instruction to leave the raft behind rather than carrying it on our heads. Sheahan addresses the common struggle of attachment to skillful qualities, beautiful meditation states, and even our Dhamma understanding itself. She offers practical guidance for the post-retreat period, when the 'fall from grace' can be most painful, and emphasizes that we must remain perpetual students, celebrating our understanding while continuously letting it go.

Tonight's talk continues with the teaching known as the raft, which describes someone following a path that leads to a shore that is perilous owing to a great expanse of water. Across the water he sees another shore where the ground is secure. He gathers grass, twigs, branches and leaves, binds them together to make a raft, and paddling energetically, crosses the flood.

The near shore, if you remember, stands for self-identity, while the far shore represents freedom. Ultimately, this means the complete freedom of Nibbana, but for the purpose of this sutta, we're best to think of the far shore as those temporary periods of freedom that emerge when we've worked our way mindfully through some struggle. The water refers to the four floods, which represent those aspects of life we identify

with: sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance. On the near shore we are unwittingly taking on a false identity and will suffer on account of that, because sooner or later this identity will be threatened. Last night we looked at the floods of sensuality and views. Tonight we look at the other floods, starting with the flood of becoming.

This flood relates to our identity as a person with a future and a past. It's especially connected with our roles as parent, daughter, technician, cook, and so on. More subtly, we also assume social roles such as respectable person, good friend, social activist. We're not fully aware of some of our roles or consciously choosing to play them. For example, we can play victim roles in certain circumstances when we don't know how to cope with misfortune. At other times, we play the role of bully in an attempt to control ourselves or others. In other circumstances, we'll end up playing roles of mother hen, wise owl, grumpy grouse. We have a whole menagerie inside us, waiting for their moment on stage.

Just as sensuality and views can play meaningful, beneficial parts in our lives, our roles can also serve us well. They give us predictable ways of interacting with others, which simplifies social situations and lets us all work together well. The problem only comes when we forget that these roles are temporary and contingent. There will come a time when they are not appropriate, and unless we can let go, we will suffer—and so also will our relationships.

Retirement, for example, is a challenge for most people. Our role as electrician or teacher or secretary, which we knew so well, is suddenly gone. We don't know who we are anymore or what to do with ourselves. As children turn into adults, we find it difficult to let go of parent-child roles.

Why is this flood termed becoming? Why not call it the flood of roles? If we're looking back on our role as teacher or parent, that isn't a problem. It's a way of understanding and appreciating our lives, learning from past mistakes and forgiving these. It's only the projection of that role into the future that gets us swept off our feet. The energetic pull of the flood is towards the future, so becoming describes the feeling tone of this flood very well.

Retirement and other major role changes in life are strong currents in the flood of becoming, but we get swept away in small ways every day. We can use each of these smaller floods as opportunities to practice making a raft and getting safely to the far shore.

In meditation, how often do we get carried away into a fantasy about how wonderful we are? It might be that we're going to write the most spectacular novel worthy of a hundred Man Booker prizes. In another meditation, we'd be climbing Mount Everest without oxygen, winning Wimbledon, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. These are mini tsunamis in the flood of becoming. Instead of condemning yourself for these, see how well you can stay afloat in their midst.

Body awareness makes a great raft. The mind can be sparking with ideas on how we will impress the world, but the body is sitting there in meditation, grounding us. In my experience, this flood seems to be pulling me towards a very pleasant, enticing future. This imagined future would be reflected in my body as pleasant sensations. If I can locate and hold attention on those sensations, the sparky thoughts and ideas fade, and I get a better sense of the energies surging around my body, generating all those pleasant sensations which my mind is interpreting as a wonderful future.

At times, then, I might be persuaded to relax a bit, enjoy the pleasure in the here and now. As I relax, I might detect a couple of separate strands to the energies flowing around my body. At one level, there is self-care, mettā—a kindly streak within me quietly generating pleasant sensations as an expression of care. Then there are the energies driven by desire, clutching onto the pleasure, embroidering a magnificent future out of it. Although I'm strongly attached to this aspect of the experience, I have to admit that the light of awareness shows it up as painful, stressful. Essentially, I'm rejecting the pleasure being offered by my mettā-streak, saying, "This isn't worth anything; what I need is a great future."

If I can sit with the emotions and feelings generated within this flood of becoming, I'm undermining the delusion at its core. This person I'm so identified with, the soon-to-be Nobel Peace Prize winner—can I find that person here and now? Are they in my chest, my stomach, my throat, my face? From afar it seems the answer is yes. I might find a hot spot in my throat, for example, where that wonderful person resides. But when I look closely, all I find are physical sensations, pleasant feelings, and the deep displeasure of confusion. Where did that wonderful person escape to?

Why can't I pin them down?

By now, awareness has penetrated the flood of becoming deep enough to be exploring the underlying flood of ignorance. Caught up in the delusion of self, I'm looking for my essence as something objective that I can know, discern, pinpoint. But I have to admit, sadly, that everything I know keeps dissolving, changing, becoming other than whatever it seemed to be a moment ago. All very unsatisfactory.

Sooner or later, I give up on the futile search. With luck, I'll surrender—for even a few blessed moments—to the truth of anattā. No longer interested in defining myself as an essential separation from the rest of experience. What a relief. A toehold on the far shore.

I'll say a bit more about the flood of delusion later on, but for now I want to come back to the flood of becoming and your daydreams about the wonderful person you truly are, if only the rest of the world would wake up and take notice. I'm not encouraging you to daydream, but to let the raft of vipassanā bob up and down on the waves of this flood as you paddle your way to the far shore.

Let's look at a potential tsunami from daily life.

Suppose you're a geography teacher standing in front of a class of teenagers. Some of them are listening, some look bored and abstracted, while a group in the back are laughing and chatting. You call for silence, but they ignore you.

"Jack, stop talking and pay attention," you call to the ringleader.

"Give me one good reason," sneers Jack, getting a laugh from his buddies.

"Okay, leave the class now and go to the headmaster's office," you order sternly.

"Come and make me," he retorts, leaning back in his chair defiantly.

Your blood is boiling and you want to murder him. You're also aware that the class has gone still, with all eyes on you to see your next move.

It's the flood of becoming, resting as always on the flood of ignorance, which is making your blood boil. You're identified with your role as teacher and it's under severe threat. If you can't control the situation, the class will lose respect for you, and you might also lose confidence in yourself as a teacher.

All this is very real, but for spiritual practice we have to be prepared to look underneath the surface reality. From the spiritual perspective, the danger is that you're being severely tempted to act on anger. Although it can seem counterintuitive, working at the spiritual level can have unexpected benefits at the surface level. If we can muster goodwill in a challenging situation, others often pick up on this and follow suit.

For a start, though, we have to put aside any desire for specific outcomes. We have to let all worldly considerations go and give all our heart into gathering bits and pieces for our raft.

Mindfulness would be a great starting ingredient. If you can register your anger and that you're feeling threatened, you will then have some objectivity on the situation. Some degree of calm would greatly help, so you can feel your feet on the ground for a few seconds or take a mindful breath. If you can, add in a mettā wish such as, "May I handle this situation wisely."

With mindfulness, calm, and a degree of mettā on board, you may be able to give mettā the flavour of equanimity with a wish like, "May your behaviour not provoke me to react." This acknowledges the danger of reactivity within a sentiment of goodwill. It forms a wide net for mettā. Hopefully your anger will be caught within this.

While none of this changes anything externally, it will have changed things radically within yourself. The situation has now been encompassed within your Dhamma practice, and no matter what happens next, you will be on board a raft rather than drowning in the sea of becoming. You've also saved yourself from the worst outcome—giving Jack a clatter and possibly getting the sack, or maybe even being charged with assault. Even if you make an utter fool of yourself and get the sack anyway, it means teaching teenagers was never going to be your career. What matters from the spiritual perspective is not whether you get the sack but how you handle that setback if it comes.

Supposing mindfulness, calm, and mettā got you into some sort of a raft, and you feel enough confidence to launch into the flood. My imagination can't stretch to anything more original than: "I can't force you out of the class, Jack, but I want you to know that I'm appalled by your behaviour, and unless it improves radically, I'll be going to the head myself after class with the full story."

You're afloat for the moment, but need to be paddling constantly in case any retort from Jack causes a wave to topple you back into fury. So is there anything else that could add buoyancy?

One would be to extend your mettā wishes to Jack and the rest of the class with something like, "May we make it through this crisis." If you have a strong faith, you could ask the Buddha or Quan Yin for help, or any devas who happen to be nearby. This would be adding faith and devotion to your raft.

One very powerful mettā practice is to see all beings as enlightened except for ourselves. Everyone else is playing their roles here on earth with only one purpose in mind: to liberate us from suffering. Our supposed enemies are only pretending to threaten us in order to sharpen our practice. If you could manage even a momentary

glimpse of that possibility, it could turn the raft into a cruise ship. No longer are you the teacher—they are the teachers, and you are the pupil. This radical shift in perspective may let you see some humour in the situation and find a creative way to handle it.

But suppose you didn't manage to build any raft and are striding towards the back of the class, intending to catch Jack by the scruff of the neck and give him a good clatter. If you've been saying the precepts regularly, then the phrase "not to harm living beings" may pop into your head to bring you to a halt. This would be to start your raft with morality.

Acknowledging the harm intended, you might resolve to find some other way of dealing with the situation. To borrow Bhante's phrase, a resolute resolution is what's needed here: I can do no harm. I ought to do no harm. I want to do no harm. I will do no harm. Resolutions are strengthened by a physical gesture, and in this case, to turn around and walk slowly back to your desk could fit the bill.

The trouble is that you've already let your emotions escalate as well as heightening the tension in the room. So there will probably be a strong temptation towards harsh speech as a means of saving face and regaining some control. Hopefully, you will also remember the precept against wrong speech and start casting around for some wisdom.

Equanimity is a major support at times like these. If you practice saying something like, "May I not make things worse for myself," during minor difficulties, the phrase may come back to save you in a situation like this. Patience is also a saviour in threatening situations. Patience allows you to acknowledge aversion for the situation and the wish that it would change. But both the aversion and the desire for change are encompassed in equanimity. Phrases like "everything in its own time" or "things are unfolding just as they should" strengthen patience.

Steadied by morality, resolve, equanimity and patience, you might then be ready to launch into the flood and find some words to resolve the situation.

Let's finish the story on an optimistic note and presume we make a good enough raft and paddle it energetically enough to get to the far shore. Whatever way the situation played itself out, we've kept our integrity and somehow got ourselves out of danger. It might be hard to think of the incident as a spiritual practice, but keep in mind the image of a rickety raft made out of grass and twigs and leaves. Our practice doesn't have to look pretty. It just has to get us across the floods.

Although we'd probably be rattled by the whole experience, we've actually done ourselves a lot of good in spiritual terms, avoiding a severe temptation to indulge anger. Our teacher role has submitted to the demands of the Dhamma, and as a result we would be in a much better position to handle the flood of becoming in future.

Finally, let's look at the flood of ignorance, which underlies all the other floods. Ignorance is a harsh sounding word for something as innocent as not knowing how to be happy. Perhaps we could call it the flood of confusion. No matter what we call it, the fact that we don't know how to be happy underlies all our suffering in life.

To traverse this flood we need a raft made out of the Four Noble Truths. We need to fully understand dukkha, let go of the desires that cause dukkha, and realize for ourselves that there is a state of perfect contentment when we let go of unskillful desire. To accomplish all of these, we need to follow the Eightfold Path.

We paddle our way through this flood in quiet moments when the other floods have subsided. We may be sitting quietly at home, physically comfortable, fed and watered, not troubled by anything in particular, just relaxing. But still there's an underlying unease. After a few moments we get restless. We want something to fill our minds, get us going again. This is the flood of ignorance. Even when all the external conditions for peace and contentment are there, we don't know how to be happy.

We see this very clearly in meditation practice—how the mind keeps creating stories and dramas to fill up the quietness. Even unhappy stories and bad dramas are preferable to nothing at all.

We also experience the flood of ignorance as we draw near the far shore and have to decide what to do with our raft, and it's that aspect of the flood I'd like to focus on tonight.

Suppose we had managed to get our cruise ship together and see Jack and all the other pupils as enlightened beings. A great wave of love pulls them into our heart and produces some wise words which resolve the crisis. That wave of love seeps into our geography teaching, and the remainder of the class passes like a dream, with everyone, including Jack and his buddies, paying rapt attention. By the time the class is over, we're walking on air. We've got through the flood of becoming in great style, but we're still in danger from the flood of ignorance.

When we're walking on air, it's very easy to believe this is the real me. We think our troubles are over, that Jack will never misbehave again, and even if he does, we know how to handle the situation. Just picture him as the Buddha. What could be simpler?

This, of course, is to be swept away on the flood of ignorance. We've identified with the happiness that has come our way and think we're in control of it, that we'll always be able to summon it at will. But until we're fully enlightened, our happiness will always depend on conditions. After a while, we'll come down to earth. And at the next class, we might be so shocked to find Jack back to his old tricks that we can't muster any metaphor for him at all, never mind picture him as the Buddha.

Let's recap on the Buddha's words on getting to the far shore: "And what should the man do with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands and feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore.'"

So we're tempted to hoist the raft on our shoulder and take it with us on our journey. But according to the Buddha, this isn't wise. We're to leave our beloved raft behind. "Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?" In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft.

So we should first reflect on our raft and appreciate how well it has served us. In this case, we would reflect on our ability to picture the pupils as enlightened beings. Doubtless there'll be a temptation to think, "I know how to do this now, I'll always be able to do it." But that would be to carry the raft on our head as we go on our onward journey. It's delusional. We have to rejoice in our raft while letting it go.

Letting go of skillful qualities is one of the major challenges on our spiritual path. It's quite natural to get attached to mettā and states of deep concentration or joy or tranquillity. Our job, though, is to note these, just as we note physical sensations or any of the hindrances. It is within that objective knowing of these as transient experiences that we can free ourselves from the dukkha of false identification.

If we don't manage this, the fall from grace can be very sore indeed. One moment we're light as a feather, loving everyone deeply. Somehow our hold on this gets broken and we're distraught to find ourselves back as the old me, with all of our petty grievances perfectly intact. In fact, we're in a worse mood than usual because of having somehow lost our footing on that wonderful far shore. This can be a very deep shock and sorrow.

One problem is that we often don't know we're attached to something until we lose it. The post-retreat period is a good teacher in this regard. For a while we may be walking on air, at peace with the world and even our old enemies. But somehow we fall back into our old ways. It can be quite shocking to see how easily we get sucked into these

sense pleasures, even though we know they're transient and unsatisfactory. Worse still, we can be tempted to blame ourselves and everyone around us for our fall from grace. Even the dog and the goldfish are despicable.

Eventually, of course, things even out, and when they do, we will be able to appreciate again the benefits of the retreat—but this time in a more balanced way, knowing that whatever new levels of mettā or clarity we might experience, they will come and go.

The first time I really became aware of this was after a three-week retreat in Nepal, which had followed on a pilgrimage around India. I was walking on air, inspired and confident that I had undergone an enormous transformation for the better. The exalted state survived the journey back to Delhi, but when the taxi to the airport was over an hour late and no other taxis were to be found, it started to quake a bit. Luckily the plane was even later than my taxi, so I got home all right. But my first night in my own bed was one of deep distress. It really felt like bereavement. I was heartbroken for the loss of that beautiful state of confidence, clarity, and inspiration.

Nowadays I try to prepare myself for the fall from grace and to see the post-retreat period as part of the retreat itself. While on retreat I'm often looking forward to the ending and to relaxing the intensity of practice. And at first the wide world seems very lovely, but sometime later despondency of one form or another descends. As Sarah, who often does long retreats here at Satipañña, put it, "I can feel worse on retreat, but I know it's all worthwhile. Whereas at home I can feel much better, but there's a background sense that I'm wasting my life." That expresses my own sentiments very well.

I nowadays spend time during the end of retreat acknowledging the deeper levels of peace, kindness, or understanding that I've been noticing from time to time. This is to appreciate the raft. I then remind myself that these aren't mine, that they depend on conditions like the rule of silence, the schedule, the company of other meditators, and so on. Although this brings grief, it also allows gratitude to flow—for these supports, for Bhante's work in establishing Satipañña and guiding us all along, and for all my efforts to practice during the retreat. During the post-retreat blues, I can then be more compassionate and take care of myself wisely.

Another danger is to neglect practice in the immediate aftermath of a long retreat, to think, "I've done enough of that for the moment, I need a break." To counter this reaction, I arrange to meet up with meditation friends, make a special effort to go to meditation group meetings, and get back into my own daily practice. The more Dhamma supports I can find in the outside world, the easier it is to get through the blues.

In summary, the post-retreat period gives us practice at letting go of whatever rafts get us through the floods. Note that the Buddha gives us two options here: either we are to sink the raft in water or drag it onto the beach and leave it there. My understanding is that we sink our raft in the water when we use it to navigate through the flood of ignorance.

Let's take an example. Suppose we have used a raft of mettā to get us through a flood of views. We're now at ease. We can see the other person's point of view. We see them as a friend and we look back at our little hissy fit. We can giggle at our pettiness. The raft has done its job.

So we spend a moment to value our metta practice, being grateful for it, resolving to continue to develop it. With that, we simply let the whole matter go. If we were meditating, we would return to the breath. If we were taking a break in daily life, we would move on to the next task. That would be to leave the raft on the beach—a very simple letting go.

Now suppose that as we are reflecting on our metta practice, valuing it, being grateful for it, we find it hard to say goodbye, to let it go. We then have to work with our attachment to the beautiful state of metta. We acknowledge whatever emotions show up and let them burn out. This is to sink our raft in the water. We are working with the flood of ignorance, seeing more deeply into the second noble truth—that desire for the state of metta is causing us to suffer. We're learning the humbling lesson that goodwill is not ours to own. It comes and goes depending on conditions. Ironically, it can make us quite angry to realize that. It's only with lots of patient effort that we can be persuaded to let the raft sink away.

Related to this, we have the Buddha's last words from the sutta: *In the same way, monks, I have taught the Dhamma compared to a raft for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding on to. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas.*

Just as we let go of metta or whatever got us across the flood, we also have to let go of whatever Dhamma wisdom we have mustered. This again is a deep challenge. We treasure our understanding of the Dhamma. It represents our only hope of happiness, so naturally we get attached. But all attachments bring pain. It's very painful to have to admit that our understanding is insufficient. In words, it all sounds so simple: desire causes suffering; let go of desire and suffering ceases. We agonize within ourselves, "I know that already. Why can't I just do it?" It seems such a mystery.

The drill, as we know, is to keep relaxing around the tensions, noting all the protests, the emotions, the confusion, the frustration, until the moment comes when something inside shifts and we're at ease. We might not be able to put into words what we've learned, but we're no longer quarreling with ourselves. We've experienced again that letting go of desire allows suffering to cease. But oh, the temptation to attach to our new level of clarity, to think, "OK, now I know, and I won't ever get mixed up again"—and then unwittingly cause ourselves repeated agony.

In this teaching the Buddha emphasizes that we must look on our understanding as part of the raft, to be really grateful that it got us across the flood, but then to let it go. The attempt to do this will show us our attachment. As I reflect on any new level of insight, delight will generally emerge. But in that delight, there's often a streak of pride, and my head literally starts swelling. The discomfort of a swollen head shows me very graphically that despite my new insight, I've still a long way to go. There is then the effort to accept this unpalatable fact and make peace with the unenlightened being that I now am.

To help with the process, we can bring to mind the pain of attaching to Dhamma understanding. We experience this in various ways. One is when we try out a different meditation technique. At first it's a welcome change. Then after some time we find it hard to concentrate. It doesn't seem to let us relax as much as our usual method. But our warrior spirit compels us to give it another go. After another aeon of fruitless effort, we're confused, angry, and frustrated. We can't catch any thoughts. They're exploding all over the place, and we believe them all. This turmoil is coming from being attached to views on how to meditate and to our role as competent meditator. So we have the flood of views crisscrossing with the flood of becoming.

When this happened to me, Bhante's advice was excellent: stick with the new technique until the aversion passes, then make a rational decision as to which is better for you. This helped me work through my attachment to the deeply focused form of Mahasi meditation that Bhante encourages.

Another way we can work with this attachment is during Dhamma discussions.

We can get hurt when our opinions are challenged, or become afraid to express any views. Then again, we can be delighted when our opinions prevail—but perhaps there's a tinge of pride in that delight. If we can bear the fear or hurt or pride mindfully, the discussion is actually a very beneficial one. No matter whether we're learning any new information, we're loosening attachment to our Dhamma views. Reflecting on the pain

of attachment makes us more willing to admit that our understanding isn't perfect, that we need to let go. We need to see ourselves as perpetual students rather than give in to temptation and view ourselves as experts.

Some statements from Arahats reflect a state of continual investigation even after enlightenment. For example, Meichi Kyo says, "I cannot detect a single moment when greed, hatred, or delusion have any power over my heart." This indicates that she is still confirming the Dhamma for herself, still investigating.

To see ourselves as perpetual students rather than experts—we are, in the Buddha's words, letting go of the raft of Dhamma. But we can love the raft even while we let it go. We can celebrate and cherish every scrap of understanding that helped us through the flood. Essentially, this is a mudita practice: celebrating what is ephemeral, transitory, disappearing in front of our eyes.

Before closing, I'd like to go back to the beginning. The sutta starts out with someone following a path that leads to a perilous shore. So too, our spiritual journey is always leading us to new challenges. It's interesting that the Buddha doesn't ever suggest turning back and retreating along the path. This signifies that we can't escape spiritual challenges by keeping to sections of the path we already know.

Supposing you have excellent concentration and can easily access tranquility when you follow your breath. As the geography teacher under attack from Jack, you could simply let all your attention dwell on your breath, and so your anger would pass and you could go on with the class, ignoring the tensions caused by the incident. If you do the same thing whenever the memory of the incident comes up in meditation, then you won't be developing spiritually. It would be like turning back on the path whenever you come to a perilous shore, and the Buddha isn't recommending that.

Instead, we must take our practice to the edge of our comfort zone, to where we don't know what to do and are flying on a wing and a prayer. That's where we build our raft. And that's how we learn the Dhamma.

May our Dhamma understanding serve us as a raft until, safe at the far shore, we lay down our raggle-taggle of knowledge and skill and move unburdened onwards.

CHAPTER 35

Beset by Perceptions (Madhupiṇḍika Sutta)

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

> *In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan unpacks one of the more challenging suttas in the Pali Canon - the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18), known as the 'Honeyball Sutta.' This discourse reveals how our attachment to perceptions creates the mental proliferation (papañca) that underlies all conflict and suffering.*
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> *The talk traces the Buddha's encounter with Daṇḍapāni and his cryptic teaching that 'perceptions no more underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures.' When the disciples seek clarification, Mahākaccāna provides a detailed explanation of how sense contact leads to feeling, perception, thinking, and ultimately mental proliferation - the endless chatter that besieges the mind.*
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> *Noirin skillfully relates this ancient teaching to modern vipassanā practice, showing how we can observe the arising of perceptions, notice our attachment to them, and discover the peace that comes when we stop delighting in mental elaboration. The talk emphasizes how 'perceptions fade as clinging is released' and explores what it means to experience reality without the constant need to categorize and solidify our experience through the lens of self-hood.*

Tonight I'd like to discuss the sutta titled The Honey Ball. In parts of India, cakes baked from flour and honey and oil are still called honey balls. When Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, heard the discourse, he said it satisfied a spiritual seeker in the way a honey ball satisfies a famished man. So what we're getting tonight is some high calorie spiritual nourishment.

Now high calorie foods can also be heavy going on the system and I'd certainly rank this sutta as a difficult one to digest. Even in the original story, as you will see, the Buddha's disciples need three separate attempts to explain the matter before the penny drops.

Let's go through all three levels of explanation before looking at any one of them in detail. It all starts with the Buddha going into a wood for his day's abiding. A man named Dandapani is walking in the woods and seeing the Buddha approaches him and asks about his spiritual beliefs and practice. The Buddha replies:

"Friend, I assert and proclaim a teaching such that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world with its gods, its Maras and its Brahmas, in this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and its people, a teaching such that perceptions no more underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures, without perplexity, shorn of worry, free from craving for any kind of being."

In many of the suttas, the Buddha finds the exact teaching needed for whoever he is talking to, and that person becomes completely enlightened, though we 21st century seekers might be baffled by the Buddha's words. But Dandapani seems as perplexed as us modern-day dullards, and is described as shaking his head, wagging his tongue, and raising his eyebrows till his forehead was puckered into three lines, after which he departed, leaning on his stick. As an aside, Dandapani wasn't a recluse, and was wandering round the wood for exercise. Perhaps the Buddha's response irritated Dandapani enough to spur a spiritual quest at some later stage.

One way or another, Dandapani departs in a huff and the Buddha settles back to his meditation for the afternoon before later rejoining his disciples and telling them about his exchange with Dandapani. It seems the disciples were also puzzled by this summary of the *Dhamma* and one of them basically asked the Buddha what he is talking about.

So the Buddha offers this explanation: "Bhikkhu, as to the source by which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man. If nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, of the underlying tendency to views, of the underlying tendency to doubt, of the underlying tendency to conceit, of the underlying tendency to desire for being, of the underlying tendency to ignorance. This is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech. Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder."

Having said this much, the Buddha then leaves his disciples and retires into his dwelling. I imagine you will be relieved to hear that this explanation hasn't done much to satisfy the disciples, who then go to seek out a senior teacher to pick out the meaning of the Buddha's words. They chose Mahakaccana, who at first demurs, saying that they should have asked the Buddha, whom he likens to heartwood in the tree of Dhamma, while he, Mahakaccana, represents only the branches and leaves of that tree. But after a bit of persuasion, he agrees to give them his interpretation, which goes like this:

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is called contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels that one perceives. What one perceives that one thinks about. What one thinks about that one men-

tally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future and present forms cognizable through the eye."

He goes on to say the same about all the other sense doors: hearing, tasting, smelling, body sensations and mind objects such as thoughts and perceptions. He then continues: "When there is the eye, form and eye-consciousness, it is possible to point out the manifestation of contact. When there is the manifestation of contact, it is possible to point out the manifestation of feeling," and so on until "When there is the manifestation of thinking, it is possible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

Likewise he says the same about all the other sense doors and then concludes with: "When there is no eye, no form, and no eye-consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact," and so on until, "when there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation." And as usual, he says the same about all the other sense doors.

This, I'm sorry to have to tell you, is the end of the line as regards explanations. The bhikkhus, we are told, were delighted with Mahakaccana's words. But they went and checked them with the Buddha as Mahakaccana himself advised them to do. The Buddha praises Mahakaccana and says he would have said exactly the same thing if he had been pressed for a further explanation.

It's at this point that Ananda describes the sutta in terms of a honey ball, saying: "Just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness comes upon a honey ball, in the course of eating it would find a sweet, delectable flavour. So too, Venerable Sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, in the course of scrutinising with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and confidence of mind." The Buddha seems pleased with Ananda's analogy and tells the assembly they should remember this discourse as the honey ball.

So let's nibble our way through the honey ball and see can we detect any of the sweet delectable flavour that Ananda found here. First, we have the Buddha's synopsis of the Dhamma for Dandapani which starts with the description of a world without conflict and follows with the description of being free from attachments with their burden of worry and strife. He describes freedom as a state where perceptions no longer underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures. He is linking internal and

external conflict with being attached to and somehow founded upon our perceptions. His Dhamma, he declares, cuts through all that so that we find ourselves at peace with the world.

He describes this peace as applying to the worldly level of princes and men. All our worldly concerns fade away. We are also at peace with the heavenly realm of gods and the hell realm of Mara. In an age so dominated by science and technology, it's not easy for us to think of heaven and hell realms. Instead, we can think of these as temporary mind states, heavenly bliss and hellish rage. We no longer quarrel with whatever we come up against in the external world or in any of the internal worlds we experience within our minds.

I don't think any of us would quarrel with the notion of inner peace and making peace with the world. It's the phrase, "Perceptions no longer underlie that brahmin who abides non-attached to sensual pleasures," which stumps us, and like Dandapani, be causing our brows to furrow into the three lines and tempting us to stomp off.

And sure enough, when his disciples ask the Buddha to explain himself, he expands on the issue of perception and how they can lead to grief. Perceptions, if you remember, are the labels we place on whatever sense data comes to us. If our eye falls on some green grass, our mind sorts through its memories of stuff that is shaped and coloured like this and comes up with perceptions "green" and "grass." We might then quietly add a perception like "unimportant," as we move on to label the next bit of incoming sense data.

In this explanation of his message to Dandapani, the Buddha basically says that if only we can stop delighting in the source of perceptions that beset us, then we'd be freed from underlying tendencies to lust and other afflictions. There's a lot to think about here. He is saying that we delight in exactly that which is causing us to suffer. Although our perceptions beset us, cause us grief, the only reason they are doing that is because we delight in the source of these perceptions. We're in a mess, it seems.

Let's look at a possible example. Suppose I'm fretting about my neighbour's dogs who I hear growling in her back garden. There may be many levels to the mental disturbance. Concern that the dogs might start fighting, grief at the thought that they are possibly being neglected, instinctive fear at the sound of growling. All of these can set off chains of thought. Is there going to be a fight? What should I do? Will I get hurt? Each of these thoughts involves a long string of perceptions. Even the basic sound had to be perceived as growling and with that perceptions like "danger" would have emerged.

Although I'm getting stressed out by all my thoughts about the dogs and what might happen, the Buddha is saying that the only cause for my distress is that I'm delighting in, welcoming and holding on to the source of these perceptions. What is the source of these perceptions? This is the question that Mahakaccana addresses when pressed for his understanding of the Buddha's words.

He traces the source back to the moment of sense contact which involves in my case the sound of growling, the sense of hearing and the faculty of consciousness. If I'd been deaf or unconscious the dogs could growl all they liked but I wouldn't be upset. But given those three conditions the growling sound made contact within my psyche.

Mahakaccana then says: "With contact as condition, there is feeling." We might think of feelings as purely physical. In my case, the growling might have impacted as a rough, low-pitched vibration on the eardrum. Although the sensations are physical, our mental system gets involved immediately, categorising the sensation so as to work out whether it is a threat or an opportunity. This gives us a feeling for the sensation as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. In the case of the growling dogs, my system feels the sound as unpleasant.

Mahakaccana then says: "What one feels, that one perceives." Many of those who have commented on this sutta note the grammatical change here. When describing the link between contact and feeling he used impersonal language: "With contact as condition there is feeling." But this changes once perception comes into the picture: "What one feels that one perceives." The language is now personal. This implies that the mind which categorises the sensation as growling also identifies itself as the one who feels this unpleasant sound and perceives it as growling. We have solidified both the external world and the internal world. We believe ourselves to be separate, a person who existed in the past and will exist in the future.

Although Mahakaccana doesn't spell out all the links of dependent origination for us, we can take it that we have at least gone through the links of desire and clinging when we form these perceptions based on feeling, to which he is referring here. Mahakaccana's linking of perception and clinging is very interesting to reflect upon. The vibrations resonating on the eardrum are my only real point of contact with the external world. Once the mind puts the label "growling" on these vibrations, it can split itself off from the raw experience. Unless I can hold the label very lightly as a tentative possibility, needing constant reaffirmation from each new sound, my subjective experience freezes around the label.

Fluidity is lost. A sense of self emerges in that abstract frozen world of this and that, me and you, growling and danger. If any of you have read Rob Burbea's book, *Seeing That Frees*, you'll probably remember the strong emphasis Rob also gives to the link between perception and clinging. Say we're lost in a temper tantrum. Our sense of self is strong and our perception of our adversary hardens into enmity. Later, when we calm down, we no longer feel so identified with our view and might also start to see the other person in a kinder light. The perception of enmity fades as clinging is released.

In general, Rob says, perceptions fade as clinging is released. This is a very useful phrase to contemplate and fits very neatly with Mahakaccana's teaching. Perceptions fade as clinging is released. In the case of the growling dogs, we're seeing the opposite side of the coin, how perceptions and clinging get intertwined and lead to *dukkha*.

Some innocuous vibrations on my eardrum have conjured up a sense of self around the perception "growling." The tendency then is to stop attending to the basic vibrations and instead to withdraw into an abstract internal world where my mind can build around that label. Many commentators say that there can be feedback loops within the 12-step process described by dependent origination, and we can see a perception-based feedback loop here. The perception "growling" can now become a new input at the doorway of the mind. And if we attend to it, we have another sense contact which deepens the unpleasant feeling, tightens the clinging and goes on to generate another perception like "danger."

As Mahakaccana says, "What one perceives, that one thinks about." Thus my mind spins through a few feedback loops and finds the perception "dog" fits neatly alongside the perception "growling" and the perception "neighbour's dogs" fit with both until the jigsaw completes and the thought and image of the neighbour's dogs growling at one another establishes itself in my mind.

Now there's nothing wrong with this. It's an aspect of human intelligence to be able to build a picture of what might be happening based on snippets of sensory information. The Buddha might have interpreted vibrations on his eardrum in a similar way. We need these interpretations in order to engage with the world. The only difference between the Buddha's approach and mine is that his piecing together of perceptions would have been done out of goodwill, as a deliberate, conscious decision to engage with the world. My picture, on the other hand, was built as an automatic reaction to unacknowledged aversion for the growling sound.

Putting the pieces of the jigsaw together gives me the illusion of control. And my problem is that I get hooked on the jigsaw. I want to find new pieces to fit, see what new picture will emerge. It's this delight in jigsaw making which, according to the Buddha, keeps rekindling lust and aversion, which then underlie our quarrels with the world.

In Mahakaccana's words, "What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates." The jigsaw grows from the thought of the neighbour's dogs growling into thoughts like, are they going to start fighting? Why do they keep two dogs? What should I do? The string of thoughts based on that initial perception "growling" are now besetting me. I fitted so many jigsaw pieces together that I'm encaged by my own creation.

This process of mental proliferation is termed *papañca* in Pali. That's what this sutta is addressing. The endless chatter of the mind. The way it complicates any simple idea, elaborates on it, examines it for defects and builds a world around it. The way it fixates on an idea and projects a happy future around that. The enmity it projects onto whatever gets in the way of that idea. This is the source of all our quarrels with the world.

But all is not lost. Even though we're trapped within our monstrous jigsaw, we can train ourselves to see that we're making and remaking the jigsaw moment after moment. Mahakaccana assures us of this when he states: "When there is the eye, a form, and eye-consciousness, it is possible to point out the manifestation of contact," and so on until "When there is the manifestation of thinking, it is possible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

It's the last statement which we spend most of our time working through. Being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. For those of you who, like me, are impatient to get to those intriguing links between consciousness and contact, contact and feeling, I offer this analogy. Imagine the honey ball has a very sweet centre but is encased in a thick hard crust. We have to patiently nibble away at the crust before we can taste the sweet fruit at the centre.

Can we find in the thinking process the sense of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation? To go back to my experience of fretting about the neighbourhood dogs, if I had stopped to ask myself, are these thoughts making me happy? I would have had to admit that they were not. Why then do I keep thinking these anxious thoughts? The answer is that I feel compelled to think them. They seem important, as if the act of thinking will protect me from harm. So the description of

being beset by my own thoughts is apt. When we notice thoughts in *vipassanā* and acknowledge that compulsion to keep thinking, we are nibbling at the hard crust of Mahakaccana's honey ball.

If I become aware of the thought stream about the neighbours' dogs and bring attention to the moment-to-moment experience, I will sense myself insisting on my point of view, that the dogs are growling, that this is a problem, that something awful might happen, and so on. These are the perceptions and notions that are besetting me.

The practice, as we know, is to bring attention to the body, letting the thoughts come and go without latching onto them. The growling sounds, my basic point of contact in the world, might seem distant, behind an impenetrable barrier, inaccessible. It's as if there's an explosion of energy keeping me away from that basic sense contact. I feel frightened, fragmented, in my head, separate from my bodily experience, from hearing and all sense contact. This is hardly surprising, as the self I believe myself to be is just one piece of the jigsaw being created from these perceptual feedback loops.

For example, the thought "this is a problem I need to fix" could be very true and pressing. How is the thought experienced? Sometimes thoughts seem very light and fleeting and an analogy often used is that of clouds passing through the sky. But as I attempt to look at a very pressing thought like this, the cloud refuses to pass by. Instead, it envelops me. My mind fixates around it. It becomes gospel. It's as if myself and the thought are enclosed within a bright bubble, defending ourselves against a hostile world. It's a very uncomfortable experience, both physically and mentally, being stuck in this bubble.

As I let attention dwell on the experience, the bubble starts to dissolve and emotions like anger or sadness may emerge. Various components of the thought come more to the fore. At one stage, it may be the concept "problem". I might feel myself insisting that there really is a problem. At another stage the notion "I need" might become predominant as I feel the anxiety behind neediness. Or it could be the notion "fix" that looms large in imagination as I feel myself grasping after a perfect world.

At this stage I can acknowledge the truth of what Mahākākāna says about being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. Notions like "fix" and "need" have my life history of self-chatter embedded within them. Every time I repeat a thought like "I need to do this or get that", I'm adding to the pressure inside all future thought bubbles with the phrase "I need". Whenever I paint a picture of how rosy the world will be once I get this or that right, I'm also adding to this pressure. The notions

"need" and "fix" and all other components of the thought are like landmines I create by mental proliferation. They lie waiting in consciousness till tread upon by some innocent bit of sense contact.

This is what the Buddha was pointing to when he explained, "Bhikkhu, as to the source by which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man, if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, aversion and so on."

It is the fact that we delight in mental chatter that causes all our problems. Each chat solidifies our hold on whatever notions and perceptions underlie it. Notions like "this is a problem" and its partner "I must fix this" would be favourites for most of us. You could probably name your own top ten notions which underlie most of your internal chatter.

We do, however, get moments when the emotional turmoil burns out and we feel less beset by thoughts. Instead of just saying "phew, I'm glad that's over" and drifting into a dreamy state of relief, we can maintain our investigative stance and see can we tease out any deeper nourishment from our honey ball. Can we look at the process of thinking from this calmer perspective to see how it comes about? Can we detect the desire to link perceptions together to form thoughts?

In my experience, perceptions are accompanied by a bright bubble of light in my mind and I get a little pop of satisfaction when a small mental bubble merges with another one. What was a vague notion now becomes more defined and the sense of self more solid. This is to study Mahākākāna's statement: "With the manifestation of perception, it is possible to point out the manifestation of thought."

If I watch carefully, I'll notice that the pop of satisfaction is short-lived. The bubbles keep deflating. The sense of certainty dissolves with them. Seeing this over and over persuades me to resist the urge towards certainty and definition, to try to make peace with a world that is constantly changing, undefinable. Many emotions may surface as I come to terms with truth in this exercise. Grief, anger, fear, shame. But the draw towards truth holds the inquiring mind in situ, and faith helps me relax deeper into the experience, trusting that the path to peace is being formed as I bear with these emotions.

Say, for example, I identify my emotional state as fear. Bringing attention to the body, I register unpleasant physical sensations and tensions. Alongside these, I might detect pulses of intense fear which push a description of what's happening into my head, insisting that the situation is horrid. What I'm experiencing according to Mahākākāna is

the manifestation of perception. "When there is the manifestation of feeling, it is possible to point out the manifestation of perception." Unpleasant feelings are there as a background and those little pushing sensations, the fleeting insistence that the situation is horrid, are momentary manifestations of perception. My mind splits itself off from what is thought of as horrid.

In time, though, my psyche relaxes from this insistence and attention dwells more continuously in the body. Although the sensations haven't changed, if I had to describe them, I might call them rough, pinching, jagged, stinging. But these labels no longer seem relevant. The mind stops bothering to categorise experience, to take meaning from it, to complicate it. It lets the roughness be rough. It lets the stinging sensations sting. Although these are still recognised as unpleasant, feeling them fully like this is less stressful than the continual popping of mental bubbles and the effort to separate off from experience to find myself as somehow outside of it all.

Sometimes this less stressful experience is so puzzling that it brings up the deeper fear of living in a world I cannot comprehend. But if conditions are right, I'll be able to trust to this unusual view of experience and start to make sense of it. I'll notice that the decreased stress is due to the fact that my interpretation of reality isn't centred around the notion of being a separate person. Sensations and feelings are known, felt, but there's no interpretation of these as happening to some entity called me. They're just coming and going of their own accord. The knowing of them is not centred around any point where I usually locate me, the knower. Its origin and extent are outside of experience, beyond the range of perception. Acknowledging the vast unknown within which my small world spins brings a deep sense of peace.

Linked to this, we have the final part of Mahākākāna's teaching: "When there is no eye, no form and no eye consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact. And so on until, when there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

This parallels the Buddha's advice from the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta when he asks us to notice the mind without lust, the mind without hate and so on. We are to notice what is not happening. This is not usually our habit but a very rich practice indeed. Again, we have to start by nibbling at the outer crust of this honey ball, acknowledging times when our minds are not beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. Whenever you feel yourself somewhat calm, interested in the sensations of breathing or walking for example, acknowledge how the absence of thought is contributing to that sense of calm.

A word of warning. Absences can be hard to acknowledge. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum and as soon as the mind notices an absence it tends to fill it with lots of thoughts. No need to worry. This is part of the purification process. It's a manifestation of our fear of living in a world we cannot fully comprehend. Rather than work through that fear, we attach ourselves to thought. We even love thinking about our woes. What would become of us if we couldn't remember our failings and regrets, our disappointments and our worries? When that gets too much, we change tack and start thinking out new plans, new strategies for making ourselves happy. These and other mental habits often surge in to fill the gap we notice at that blessed moment of not being beset by our thoughts. Bearing with this and reflecting on the possibility, and occasional reality, of not thinking, loosens our attachment to these stories, encourages us to live a more embodied life.

In deeper meditations we may get the chance to study the other absences Mahākākāna mentions and see that thoughts cannot form without perception, that perceptions only form when there is feeling and in the absence of sense contact that feelings cannot form. At the most profound level we might even get a glimpse of sense contact emerging as we bring attention into one or other of the sense doors to detect a signal from the outside world.

At one level the exercise seems academic. Who cares whether feelings can only register based on sense contact? How does that help me cope with the challenges in life? One answer to this is that the exercise itself is purifying. Contemplating the possibility of living for even a moment without perception shows us how deeply attached we are to our way of seeing the world. We purify ourselves as we bear with the pain of attachment, the anger and grief that shows up as our minds probe this border to our understanding.

But do remember that there's nothing wrong with perception. It's a vital part of our intelligence. It's only attachment to perception that does the damage. When we dare to let go of needing to always see things my way we slide into a mysterious harmony. Our being is content and at ease as within an indescribable universe. We lose our desire to describe ourselves in any way that can be contained within the phenomenal world.

These moments also help us understand the Buddha's somewhat puzzling phrase in his address to Daṇḍapāni: "Perceptions do not underlie the Brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures." In these moments of peace we are experiencing a fluid world where categories like "this" and "that" are not absolute but changing, dissolving, reforming in line with the constantly changing sensory stream. The sense of me is not

defined by our present mood or our roles or by any measure we can make of our skills or behaviour. We don't bother defining what is indefinable. To use the Buddha's phrase, perceptions do not underlie our being.

We become more willing to experience life at the level of sensation and feeling and may even see how these come into being moment after moment. The beauty of this simple, fluid level of reality shows us that our dreams and worries are irrelevant, burdensome, unskillful. Although these moments of deep insight are only temporary, they give us hope. Our faith in the Dhamma is strengthened and when the self comes back to impose its will on the world, it is not quite so dictatorial, more ready to listen, to negotiate, to appreciate the kindness and wisdom on offer from the world. With a lighter heart we can pass over many grievances and see the wisdom of accepting the imperfections of the world, working with people, not against them. Eventually the Buddha assures us we will come to the end of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech. "Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder."

In summary then, the Honeyball Sutta describes the Dhamma in terms of its ultimate goal of perfect peace. This is a broad-sweep overview of the Buddha's vision for his followers. The Sutta also pinpoints why we don't experience this peace, describing how we delight in and attach to our perceptions and especially the perception of ourselves as a separate substantial entity at the centre of our world. Attachment to perception leads on to thoughts which eventually weave a net to ensnare us within a painful, confining world of self-definition.

The ultimate peace comes when we no longer attach to perceptions, no longer get fooled into finding our essence within anything that can be pinpointed, named, defined or in any way bound within the confines of the mind and body.

So let's use our meditation time wisely. Now and again we might be troubled by the barking of the dogs nearby or other sounds. Can we feel any underlying emotions? Can we feel the urge to *papañca*? To embroider and complicate every idea, go over and back on it, defend its flaws, embellish our point of view. Can we sense how we create a world out of all this papañca? Similarly, if you're captivated by the dragonflies hovering over the pond, can you detect the urge to amplify the experience, to tell someone about it, to dig a pond in your own garden? Does all this thinking add to the beauty of the experience or detract from it?

In moments of ease, can we acknowledge the absence of thinking? Can we see how perceptions fade as clinging is released? Can we detect the peace on offer when we are not blowing up so many mental bubbles? Is that peace founded upon perception? Is it mine? Is there even a me?

May our meditation help us to break through the tough crust of *papañca* and be nourished by the honey ball of the Dhamma.

CHAPTER 36

The Buddha's Death (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta)

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

In this retreat closing talk, Nóirín Sheahan guides practitioners through the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16), the detailed account of the Buddha's final three months of life and his passing into Parinibbāna. She illuminates how this ancient text serves not only as historical record but as a practical teaching on closure—how to take leave of activities, relationships, places, and ultimately life itself with wisdom and grace.

The talk explores the Buddha's deeply human qualities even in his enlightened state: his chronic physical pain at age eighty, his appreciation of beauty at the shrines of Vesālī, his need for supportive conditions like friendship with Ānanda, and his final journey of nearly 200 miles on foot despite severe illness. Sheahan examines key themes including the role of muditā (appreciative joy) in sustaining life energy, the Buddha's refusal to appoint a successor and his instruction to be 'islands unto yourselves,' and his gentle response to Māra's final temptation—the desire to grasp at Nibbāna itself.

Practitioners are offered contemplations on preparing for death, the wisdom of saying proper farewells (the Buddha's 'elephant's look' back at Vesālī), and finding peace within physical limitation. The teaching concludes with the Buddha's final words—'All conditioned things have the nature to decay. Strive diligently for your liberation'—inviting reflection on how both grief and wisdom can coexist as we witness impermanence.

As we're coming toward the close of the retreat, I thought it would be fitting to look at the last of the Buddha's teachings, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, known as the Buddha's Last Days.

Nibbāna, as you know, describes the state experienced by those who are enlightened. The fires of passion extinguish themselves in Nibbāna, and so "extinguishing" is one translation for the term. If this seems like a bleak goal for the spiritual life, we have Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro's assurance that in the Buddha's time it was believed an extinguished fire went into a state of potential, liberated from its location to suffuse the whole universe with its energy. This ties in with alternative translations for Nibbāna such as unbinding, liberation, freedom, the deathless, the unborn. And of course we have positive descriptions of Nibbāna as perfect happiness and contentment.

The Buddha entered the state of Nibbāna when he fully understood the Four Noble Truths as he sat under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. He then taught others how to come to the same understanding for over four decades until, aged eighty, his body dies and he enters the state known as Parinibbāna. This term refers to Nibbāna after the dissolution of the five aggregates. Unenlightened beings like us cling to these aggregates of body and mind in the mistaken belief that these constitute our essential being. The Buddha ceased clinging at Bodh Gaya, but his transcendent knowledge and understanding could still manifest within the world through these aggregates. At the moment of death, his transcendence became completely non-manifest, untraceable.

The Buddha does not answer questions of the form, "Does the Buddha exist after death?" The state of the Buddha is beyond measure, he says, so it is meaningless to speak of this in terms of existence or non-existence. The Parinibbāna Sutta does not try to unpick this conundrum, nor does it attempt any description of Nibbāna or Parinibbāna, but simply reports the facts of the Buddha's last days.

Most commentators agree that the Sutta has been embroidered by devotees who wished to remember the Buddha in exalted terms. For example, he is said to have transported himself over the river Ganges along with all his order of monks. He later caused an earthquake by revoking his will to live and another as he died. Muddy waters miraculously cleared to let him drink, his skin glowed brighter than gold, and flowers bloomed out of season to honour him on his deathbed. There are seemingly pointless stories of people locking their chariot wheels as they vie to have him attend their house for a meal, almost as the paparazzi pursue modern-day celebrities.

As against this, there are many credible and inspiring descriptions of his last days, which we can use as a teaching on closure—how we might hope to end our own lives. And of course, we can practice on a smaller scale, using this as a model of how to take our leave from any activity, even from this retreat.

At the start of the Sutta, there is no talk of his impending death. It seems he is just doing what he had spent the past decades doing, going from place to place, teaching the Dhamma. Despite his frail old body, he is almost constantly on the road during these last days. He starts out in Vulture's Peak, and we are told of seventeen stopping points before he reaches his final resting place at a grove of sal trees at Kushinara. I was fortunate enough to have visited Vulture's Peak and the sal grove when on pilgrimage with Bhante and others in 2006. The distance between them is almost two hundred miles. Even in the comfort of a saloon car it was a long journey. Imagine the energy and resolve involved in doing that on foot as an eighty-year-old in chronic pain and with a body that was just about holding together.

To follow the Buddha's example is not just to sit on our cushions. We must also give ourselves wholeheartedly to whatever activities we choose to do in the service of others.

Much of the main drama of the Sutta happens in Vesālī, the region where the Buddha had found his first meditation teacher. He also returned here after enlightenment to teach and establish monastic settlements. It is in Vesālī that the business of the Buddha's death starts to loom large. He makes his final rains retreat here. During the retreat he becomes very ill and realizes he's in danger of death. He considers it would be unfitting to die in this way without having taken proper leave of his disciples. And so we are told he made a tremendous effort to summon the will to live and thereby overcame his sickness.

This is a good illustration of the Buddha's care for individuals and not just for humanity at large. It would have been easy to throw in the towel. He had accomplished his mission to achieve enlightenment and teach others how to follow in his footsteps. He had achieved all his broader goals. But he was also concerned for the particular, for Ānanda and his companions. He didn't want them finding out news of his death while they were on retreat themselves, with all the confusion that would cause. He wanted to die in a way that would minimize trouble for those he was leaving behind.

The great effort the Buddha made to overcome this illness is also a sober reminder to get our own affairs in order so that our death will cause minimal disturbance to others —making a will, tackling thorny issues like end-of-life care, and deciding how much intervention we want. These aren't easy matters to address, but any headway we can make is our best attempt to follow the Buddha's example of caring for others up to and beyond the point of our death.

Happily the Buddha was able to overcome his illness. Afterwards Ānanda tells the Buddha how distressed he had been to see the Buddha so near death. The only thought that consoled him, he said, was that he was sure the Buddha would not die without making a statement about who should lead the monks after his death.

The Buddha seems surprised by this, asking, "What does the Order expect of me?" For himself, he says, he doesn't think of the Order in terms of needing a leader. Instead, he advises that you should live like islands unto yourselves, be your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as your refuge and no other refuge.

Thus, he doesn't try to extend his influence over the Order beyond his own lifetime. He fully accepted the limitations of his human form. The Order might be expecting him to look into the future and work out what would be best, but he has no such God-like

view of himself. Having done his job of teaching and leading, he's now going to let go completely. He leaves no clear authority structure and instead asks that each person take responsibility for their own liberation, using the Dhamma as their guide. This empowers everyone to get on with the job themselves and guards against the corrupting effect of power.

A very wise and trusting approach to the future of the Dhamma. He is leaving it up to all of us to carry on his life's work, which is an inspiring thought.

As if to stress the limitations of his earthly form and drive home that people need to take full responsibility for their own liberation and not look on him as some form of God, the Buddha describes his body as old and worn out. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathāgata's body is kept going by being strapped up.

We might think that the enlightened state would somehow let the Buddha float above problems like the aches and pains of old age. Although he didn't identify himself with these limitations, he was intimately aware of them and tells Ānanda that the only time his body feels comfortable is when he withdraws his attention from mundane matters to enter a state of deep concentration, devoid of perceptions.

There are a couple of points worth reflecting on here. Firstly, the Buddha was normally attending to mundane matters and had to deliberately withdraw attention in order to give his body some comfort. Enlightenment obviously doesn't mean living in a cloud of bliss, disconnected from the world. The freedom of Nibbāna can be found within the mundane.

Sometimes we confuse Nibbāna, or the path to Nibbāna, with very exalted states we might touch upon in meditation. While these give us wonderful glimpses of the potential for our human mind, we can overvalue them and then reject ordinary life as worthless by comparison. It helps us counter this natural preference for meditative bliss when we reflect that the enlightened mind of the Buddha was normally engaged with the mundane details of life—seeing whatever was in front of his eyes, tasting his food, noticing memories and perceptions registering in consciousness, feeling the pain of his eighty-year-old body.

Enlightenment does not protect the Buddha from pain. The only difference between his experience of pain and ours is that he would not have added to the problem with any emotional turmoil. He wouldn't have got irritable or exasperated or felt hard done

by. He could continually find the escape from suffering within the experience of an aching body. Thus he could accept the pain, discomfort, indignity and other limitations of ageing with serene equanimity.

Pain and sickness can make us feel very vulnerable. We lose that all-important sense of being in control of our bodies, directing the show. The path to enlightenment involves the very humbling lesson that we cannot escape the horrors of illness except by getting close to that sense of horror, watching it dissolve moment after moment in the light of awareness. In the midst of our illness, we can encourage ourselves with the thought that the Buddha experienced exactly this kind of challenge and somehow found peace within it, as well as the determination to continue on his long and arduous last journey.

The next stop on that journey is at the Kapāla shrine, where he and Ānanda go after their alms round on the following day. The Buddha remarks on the beauty of the shrine and names the many other shrines he finds delightful in this region of Vesālī. Although his body is old and worn out, and he's only just recovered from an illness that brought him close to death, he now declares that it would be within his power to live for a full century.

We're told he makes this declaration several times at different shrines around Vesālī. In one breath he remarks on the beauty of the place, and in the next declares that he could live out a full century. Each time, we are told, the Buddha was giving Ānanda a hint to request that he live for another twenty years. Had Ānanda taken the hint, the Buddha would then have assented to his friend's request.

There are a couple of points here worth reflecting on. One is to note the importance that muditā plays in the Buddha's life. Muditā is one of the four brahmavihāras, so it's hardly surprising to find him practising this in his last days. And yet it is worth reflecting on the implications more deeply.

We can take it that the Buddha didn't need earthly beauty to be perfectly happy. He had transcended suffering and would have been quite equanimous in a slimy pit. Why then does he take the trouble to notice and admire what he considered beautiful, take delight in it, and comment so frequently on it?

Muditā energises us. Think of how your heart lifts when you see a beautiful vista, how vibrant you suddenly feel. It's the same for the Buddha. Although his default position is equanimity, he needs supportive conditions to feel joy and let that invigorate his body and mind. He is perhaps more human than we let ourselves believe.

At eighty years of age and following a serious illness, his life energy is running low. Moved by the beauty of the shrines at Vesālī, muditā moves him to declare that he could, if necessary, maintain the will to live a further twenty years.

If muditā could spur the Buddha's will to live, it can surely generate very beneficial energies within us—helping us bear with difficulties, lifting our hearts for some arduous task, inspiring us to better things. Often we feel so overburdened by our troubles that we don't spend any time appreciating nature, architecture, music, or any kind of art. The Parinibbāna Sutta encourages us to connect with the delightful aspects of the world. Let them lift our hearts.

Tomorrow afternoon, after you've been liberated from the rigours of the retreat, spend some time really looking at things—flowers, trees, the view, or any of the statuary here at Satipañña. You never know how this might repay you when you're trying to overcome a deathly illness.

When I was recovering from laryngectomy, anxiety was like a transistor radio blaring in my ear. But when I looked at a flower, the radio switched itself off momentarily. As I gazed out my window at a tree, it was as if all those jarring notes were being absorbed within its branches and leaves. Although I didn't think of this in terms of survival and rekindling the will to live, in retrospect I can see that these moments of relative ease possibly gave my body the rest it needed to recover.

Another point to acknowledge is the value of our human relationships. If a good friend asks us to do something, this can spur us well beyond what we would otherwise be prepared to do. The Buddha's need for Ānanda to request that he live on to his potential lifespan of a hundred years gives us further evidence that transcendence did not make him all-powerful. Supportive conditions, such as the request of a friend, were also needed to maintain his life energy.

If the Buddha could need a friend to spur his resolve, how much more do we need good friends to spur us on? Any time and effort we spend on developing friendships within our sangha is time spent on our path to freedom. We want to be connected to people who will bring out the best in us.

It's also worth noting the wisdom in the Buddha's leaving it up to Ananda to make the request that he live a further twenty years. My grandfather used to say, "If a thing is worth having, it's worth asking for."

Doubtless, there would have been value in the Buddha living for longer. He would have helped hundreds, possibly thousands of people. But he had to die sometime. There was always going to be some limit on the good he could do on earth. He wasn't one to

take on hardship to no avail. When he first considered teaching, he decided against it, believing that people wouldn't understand him and so he would only be wearing himself out for no good reason, exasperating himself. Although an enlightened being does not suffer, neither do they choose hardship unless there is good reason.

Likewise, we can be judicious in what we offer to others, taking our needs and limitations into account. It is generous to do many acts of kindness quietly without waiting to be asked. But when the task is arduous, it's best to follow the Buddha's lead and just hint that we could do this. Generosity needs to be balanced by wisdom. Otherwise, we could expend much of our life energy doing work that others aren't ready to support or value, and which might therefore be a waste of effort.

Back to the sutta now, where Ananda fails to take the Buddha's hint and makes no request that the Buddha live to his full century. I can imagine the Buddha smiling quietly at that. The path is now cleared for his Parinibbāna.

The next step is for the Buddha to relinquish the will to live. At this point, Māra, the personification of evil in Buddhism, makes his final appearance in the Buddha's life, trying to get the Buddha to make a hasty exit into Parinibbāna. Though the scriptures always personify Māra as an evil being who tempts the Buddha, we can also see this in more mundane terms, as the last vestiges of desire within the Buddha himself. And this last temptation of the Buddha is for Nibbāna.

Those of you who saw Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* will know that Scorsese imagines Christ to be tempted by the desire for life. In the Buddha's case, his last temptation was not for life, but for escape from the round of life and death. Having accomplished all that was expected of a Buddha, Māra tempts him to bask in the perfect contentment and peace of Nibbāna. But to succumb to this final desire would be to grasp at Nibbāna, to see it as mine, a state that could be contained within the Buddha's humanity.

Needless to say, the Buddha doesn't fall for this. Normally he vanquishes Māra vigorously, first and foremost by detecting the presence of Māra and then by expounding the Dhamma to show how Māra's temptations are no match for the Buddha's wisdom. The vanquished Māra slinks off in misery. For example, in one description, Māra is left silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, with nothing to say, scraping the ground with a reed.

Curiously, in this last bout between the pair, the Buddha is uncharacteristically accommodating. He simply says, "You need not worry, evil one. The Buddha's passing will not be long delayed." We can take this as a suggestion for how we might deal with our

own desires for enlightenment. We don't have to quash these out of hand as we might a desire for sense pleasure. We can take a gentler approach, recognising the worthy aim of the desire while refusing the temptation to grasp.

Let's take a practical example. Striving for insight is an experience we probably all go through. Let's see how a modified version of the Buddha's response might help, repeating to ourselves, "Do not worry, evil one, insight will come in its own time."

I tried this out one time when I felt myself straining to get on top of things, trying to see how I was causing so much dukkha for myself. Repeating the phrase helped me see my experience from a more objective point of view. Grasping at insight was experienced as physical tension manifesting at several points of my body—the diaphragm, the chest, throat, and face. It was almost as if there was a gigantic hand stretching upwards inside my body, clutching at a stream of very unpleasant sensations that were shooting upwards towards my head. It seemed so imperative that I catch these sensations, holding one of them long enough to get a good look at it.

After a few moments, the phrase "evil one" gave me pause for thought. Why was this grasping really evil? Fear and aversion surfaced as I considered this. To my surprise, the grasping diminished somewhat, as if cowed by the judgment "evil." By now I could see the link between this exercise and one of the steps in the sutta we considered a few nights ago on the removal of distracting thoughts. You may remember the step where we condemn ourselves harshly for the distraction, even imagining a carcass being slung around our necks. The phrase "evil one" was having a similar effect, quelling the unskilful desire, holding it in check so it could be examined objectively.

By comparison, the phrase "do not worry" had a soothing effect and helped me consider the concept "evil one" in a more balanced way. I could sense the judgment as valid, seeing the dukkha I was creating by grasping and how unskilful this was. However, it wasn't a total self-condemnation. The grasping was just one portion of my experience. The effort to say the phrase "do not worry" was separate from the grasping and was sensed as caring and wise.

Thus the phrase "do not worry, evil one" had the effect of showing me the dukkha being caused by grasping. Although the concept "evil one" stirred fear and judgment, this was being used to avail, clarifying where my problem lay. The second half of the reflection—"insight will come in its own time"—helped me to step back and get a wider view of my experience. I noticed a mental image of light which appeared to be glowing gently above my head. This, I sensed, represented the insight I was grasping after.

I felt the sadness of being unable to make direct contact with that gentle light. It seemed always out of reach. But some comfort trickled through as I repeated the phrase, "Insight will come in its own time." The comfort seemed to emanate from the light itself. Once I stopped grasping after it, the light became a compassionate warm glow, softening the stinging sensations of grief.

As the meditation evolved, I found myself making peace with my current level of understanding. I felt deeply grateful for every scrap of it—every moment where I stopped grasping and let my imperfect wisdom soothe me, reassure me that I was on the right path.

It might also be useful to try out this exercise if you sense any grief at the closing of the retreat or any dread of going back into the big bad world. This grief or dread represents a tendency to grasp whatever peace, clarity, mettā, or other form of goodness you touched upon during the retreat. There is wisdom in the desire for these qualities, so you don't want to condemn the desire itself. Wise desire is termed *chanda* in Pali, to distinguish it from the unwise desire for sense pleasures, fame, success, and so on. Those unskillful desires are termed *taṇhā*, and these are the ones that lead to suffering. *Chanda*, on the other hand, energises our path to freedom.

And yet, grasping after beautiful states of mind brings suffering. Clarity and mettā and all such states come and go depending on conditions. So you might like to experiment with the phrase, "Do not worry, evil one—there will be another retreat next year," and see whether that helps you face into the world outside of Satipañña. But always remember that vipassanā is your primary tool in dealing with any emotional disturbance. This is just a suggestion that might help you tweak yourself in the right direction. It's a form of self-care, finding the appropriate reflection to help you through a challenging situation.

Back to the Buddha's last days now, where having soothed Māra in this final exchange between them, he is then able to renounce his will to live in a perfectly equanimous way. He then announces to Ānanda and the other disciples that he will pass away in three months' time.

All of this part of the story—the rains retreat, his sickness, his comments on beauty, his offer to live to a century, his last exchange with Māra, and his renunciation of the will to live—happened in Vesālī. We are told that as he leaves the region, he gazed on it with an elephant's look, meaning that he turned his full body around to look behind him, just as an elephant has to do if it wants to look behind. After this long gaze, he tells Ānanda that this is the last time he will see Vesālī.

The Buddha wasn't one for idle chatter, so we can assume this comment and his elephant's look were poignant expressions of appreciation and farewell. So many of the Buddha's teachings hammer home the need not to attach ourselves to anything in the phenomenal world. But that's not to say we distance ourselves from the world, disdaining what it offers. Enlightenment hasn't removed the Buddha from the earth, neither in terms of the aches and pains of old age nor the beauty he finds in Vesālī. His Buddha nature participates fully in his humanity.

This reflection provides another encouragement not to neglect mundane reality in our search for enlightenment. We engage fully in the world. It's where we find our path to freedom. We can afford to get fond of whatever places or people or aspects of the world that enrich our lives. The only thing we have to keep reminding ourselves is that all delight depends on a multitude of conditions beyond our control. It will all fall apart someday. We have to find the courage to appreciate and enjoy and love all the wholesome but ephemeral pleasures of the world.

Saying farewell is perhaps the most challenging aspect of appreciation. The Buddha's elephant look towards Vesālī gives us a clear indication not to fudge on this, so intent on our next move that we ignore what we're leaving behind. Saying goodbye is a poignant muditā practice.

Having said his farewell to Vesālī, the Buddha spends the next three months travelling from place to place in the manner he had done since he started teaching. In Pāvā, he eats a meal which gives him food poisoning. The next day, obviously very ill, he succeeds in making his way to Kusinārā, where he will die. Next time you're suffering the indignity of vomiting and diarrhoea, you might comfort yourself with the thought that this was how the Buddha died—so you're in good company.

The sutta suggests that Kusinārā was a quiet rural region, and Ānanda remonstrates with the Buddha for choosing such a miserable little backwater of a place in which to die. He urges him to go to one of the great cities instead, declaring that would be a more fitting place for the Buddha to die.

Although Ānanda grieved sorely at the Buddha's passing, his understanding of the Dhamma told him that parinibbāna was something to celebrate. This sentiment was captured in one of the verses written after the Buddha's death, which we chant every morning as part of the Vipassanā verses: "All conditioned things are impermanent. It is their nature to arise and pass away. Having arisen, they disappear. Their cessation is happiness."

Wouldn't it be wonderful to live from such wisdom? To know that death is the deepest happiness. We could give ourselves fully into every activity, every relationship, enjoy all wholesome aspects of life to the full, knowing that the truest bliss will come when all this activity fades away. It really is to get the best of both worlds.

Ānanda, however, was not fully enlightened. The verse he uttered on the Buddha's passing confessed his suffering: "Terrible was the quaking, men's hair stood on end, when the all-accomplished Buddha passed away."

Before we come to that best of both worlds wisdom, we bear witness to the dukkha that results from attaching ourselves to anything in this world of phenomena.

Perhaps to symbolise this, the Buddha rejects Ananda's wish for him to celebrate Parinirvana in the style of earthly splendour, in a big city surrounded by pomp and circumstance. Likewise, he turns his back on the more refined beauties of the world, symbolised by the shrines of Asali and other centres where he had lived, established monasteries, and taught. He chooses instead the relative obscurity of Kusinara for his final release. Perhaps this was to symbolise that the path leads forever onwards, beyond what is already established, into the unknown, into silence, the quiet peace of Nibbana.

At one point during this last day of the Buddha's life, Ananda can no longer contain his grief and withdraws to a quiet spot to weep. When the Buddha hears of this, he summons him, telling him not to grieve, reminding him that all earthly phenomena, no matter how dear, must pass away. This is tough love, but his next comments show a deep sensitivity toward the grieving process. He praises Ananda for his services: "For a long time, Ananda, you have been in the Buddha's presence, showing loving kindness in acts of body, speech, and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly, and unstintingly." He commends the way Ananda has administered his work: "Monks, Ananda is wise. He knows when it is the right time for monks to come and see the Buddha, when it's the right time for nuns, for lay people, for kings, and so on." He then lauds Ananda's many endearing qualities, telling how people are always pleased to see him, delighted when he speaks to them, disappointed if he is silent.

When we grieve someone's passing, we unwittingly diminish our own value. Psychologically, we let our strength and happiness die with them, projecting all our good qualities onto the dying person. Working our way through grief is to recover our confidence, our self-worth. The Buddha hastens Ananda's recovery in this public expression of appreciation, praise, and admiration for his friend. In this parting kindness to Ananda, the Buddha leaves us with the conundrum of anatta: we need to cherish ourselves in order to see through the delusion of self.

Before we let the Buddha take his final breath, let's look back at some of the points we can take from this discourse.

Firstly, it gives us a picture of the Buddha as a very real human being. His enlightened state is fully incarnate in the world. It does not shield him from aches and pains or from unexpected and untimely illness. Neither does it leave him immune to the beauty of the world or the joy of friendship. These are needed to fuel his energy and will to live. See if you can find occasions for mudita during these last days of the retreat. If there are any aspects of Satipañña which helped you along—the shrine or walking rooms, some restful spot in the meadows, your favourite walking path, the stupa or any of the statues that meant something to you—spend a few moments acknowledging these, expressing gratitude for whatever way they inspired you. When leaving, turn back, elephant style, to say farewell.

We can also remember the Buddha's last days as a contemplation on sickness, ageing, and death. Within our imagination we might be all powerful, but these provide objective limitations on what we can achieve in the world. The really good news is that provided we give things our best shot, we can take these limitations as a gift. We can bow out delighted that the struggle is over and that we can now relax and let go.

The Sutta shows the important role Ananda played in the Buddha's life. Much of what we know about the Buddha comes from the long conversations he has with Ananda. He tells him what is on his mind, uses him as a sounding board, and comforts him in his grief. We can let ourselves be inspired by their relationship. Over these last days, you might spend time thinking of your friends, especially those with whom you share the spiritual path. You could vow to develop these friendships and share the merits of your retreat with them.

Despite all the evidence of the Buddha's love for and appreciation of the people and places that played a role in his life, his last temptation was not for life, but for the peace and bliss of Nibbana. Remembering this, we incline our minds to that ultimate bliss and encourage ourselves to find happiness in letting go. But the Buddha didn't give in to Mara's last temptation for him to bow out early. He maintained his mission to teach the Dhamma right up to the end, answering questions, advising people on specific points, giving Dhamma talks.

It is said that at the very last moments of his life, his disciples all fell silent. Three times he asked if there were any more questions, but no one voiced any. With that, the Buddha uttered his last words: "All compound things have the nature to decay. Strive diligently for your liberation."

With that, the Buddha took his last breath. His enlightened state was no longer incarnate within the five aggregates of body and mind through which he had lived his life and been known by others. The Sutta goes on to describe the ceremonies that followed and the division of the relics of his body, but I think the Buddha's last breath is the best point at which to take our leave.

As we contemplate his Parinibbana, we may, in part, feel the anxiety and sorrow of Ananda. Another part of us might rejoice in the wisdom of the Vipassana verse, which declares that true happiness comes when all things pass away. Torn between these extremes, we might feel stuck and confused. All of this—our wisdom and our many layers of delusion—is witnessed by the untraceable.

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