Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:59

Sally talked last night about the Four Noble Truths, the teaching of the Buddha that describes the journey from suffering to the end of suffering, or nibbana, the state that's free from all craving. And the question arises in our meditation practice: is that kind of freedom that the Buddha was pointing to, some taste of freedom, only available at the very end of the path when the person has become completely established in nibbana, in the state of final awakening? Or is there some freedom that we can find in our journey before then? Sally pointed to this phrase of temporary nibbana that Ajahn Buddhadasa used.

So in the talk tonight, I want to focus on this question of the freedom that may be available here and now, before several lifetimes of journey along the path to full awakening—something possibly available sooner to us. And I'm going to describe it in terms of what one teacher called an unentangled knowing. So that's the subject of the talk this evening: unentangled knowing.

For those of you who aren't native English speakers, this is a very odd word, unentangled. A tangle refers to a twisting of yarn or string or hair if you've been riding in a convertible and it's gotten in a knot. It's not easy to undo those tangles. Then entangle is the verb that describes that process happening. You can think about when a kitten plays with a big batch of yarn, how the kitten can get entangled in it and get their paws all wrapped up in it, or we can get entangled in a web of untruth. I remember when I was in my teens, somebody that I really respected asked me to tell a lie for them. I felt very conflicted and it was really painful for me. So we can get entangled in all these different ways, and putting "un" in front of it means that it's not entangled. So this is the phrase: unentangled knowing.

It was coined by a Thai laywoman teacher named Upasika Kee. It's unusual for women to teach in Thailand. Most of the teaching is done by monks. And it's even more unusual for the teaching to be done by a lay woman, which she was. She was not an ordained nun. This name Upasika means a lay woman supporter, and Kee was her given name. So she's known as Upasika Kee.

This phrase comes out of a dharma talk of hers in a very wonderful book, which I recommend to you called Pure and Simple. She taught in Thailand somewhere between the 1950s and the 1970s. So she's sort of contemporary. And her teachings are a very clear pointing, again and again and again, to the central point of the dharma: how we get caught and how we can work to free our hearts and minds. I found her teaching really powerful and a direct pointing.

This concept of tangle was used often by the Buddha in his lifetime in describing the situation of things. He said, for example, "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." So you get the sense of how all these contradictory desires that make up craving sort of weave us into this

web that is confining and traps us. It's hard to release the mind from that tangle.

On another occasion, there was this kind of nice dialogue. A questioner came up to the Buddha, who you remember had the family name of Gotama, so he was often known as Gotama Buddha. And this questioner said, "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle." Doesn't sound so different from now, does it? We could say that of our generation too. This generation is entangled in a tangle. "So I ask of Gotama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

That's our situation, isn't it? We find ourselves caught in this tangle. We could call it craving or greed, aversion, delusion. Who succeeds in disentangling it? And the way the Buddha answered the question was that one who is developed in virtue, meditation, and wisdom disentangles this tangle. That's the development of the Eightfold Path that Sally was talking about: sila, samadhi, and pañña. So that's the work that we're engaged in here—disentangling ourselves from this tangle.

So Upasika Kee picked up on this image, which is used often in the suttas, and her central quote reads like this: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." We'll come back to this later. An inward staying, unentangled knowing.

This inward staying is kind of the work of meditation, isn't it? We're always examining our inner world in response to both our inner world and the outer world, but this inner world of response—an unentangled knowing. This will be the theme.

The way that she uses this phrase evokes a kind of mindfulness that is very aware of all the objects of our experience but isn't caught up in them, isn't attached, isn't clinging, isn't holding on, isn't enmeshed in them. It's a quality of mindfulness that is in a state of some freedom.

in relation to all the things that are coming and going, the objects of our experience.

So there's a sense with this word knowing that there's a full kind of presence and awareness, that this mindfulness is not limited in scope, but it's kind of fully there with everything that is happening to us, but it's not caught up. It's not caught in the reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is actually our experience, many moments of the day. When Sally was talking last night about temporary nibbana that Ajahn Buddhadasa was pointing to, I think she quoted him as saying that if we didn't have moments of coolness like this throughout the day, we'd all go mad. If we were enveloped in the kilesas nonstop, it would drive us crazy. But in fact, we're not. And we have these moments of unentangledness many times throughout the day.

So in the talk tonight, I want to point to how we can recognize those, how we can develop them further. And by recognizing them and developing them, they can become more and more of our experience. We will know how they take place.

In addition, I want to describe a couple of approaches to meditation that lead directly to this kind of

relationship, this kind of outcome.

Just one little footnote or caveat. A lot of the vocabulary I will use in the talk tonight comes from one particular school of Theravada, and that is the Thai forest lineage. So some of the vocabulary would not be comfortable for practitioners from other lineages, lineages that are very closely tied to the Abhidhamma or the Visuddhimagga or very orthodox Theravadan sources. Thai forest tradition has a little different way of expressing things. So that's the viewpoint that I want to communicate this evening.

In order to understand clearly how freedom is accessed, we want to understand a little more deeply how bondage takes place, how it is that we get caught or entangled with the objects of our experience.

The Buddha's primary outline for the detailed way that we get caught is a teaching called the Chain of Dependent Origination. In the chain of dependent origination, the Buddha uses these twelve causal links that start from ignorance and go through intermediate steps that lead to the final outcome, which is forms of suffering. This teaching explains in detail how suffering gets generated. It puts it as a kind of cyclic process that will happen over and over and over again until we learn how to interrupt it.

Now I'm not going to go through all twelve links because that would be a whole other talk in and of itself. Later someone may do that in this retreat, I'm not sure. So I'm going to drop out the first five links, which for my taste get a little bit philosophical and stir up views and opinions. I'm going to drop out the last three links, which also get a little philosophical and can stir people up. I'm going to focus on what I consider the central four links of the chain, which are the most experiential and which we can start to notice in our meditation practice and work with directly in our immediate experience.

These four links start from what I'd say is our basic situation as human beings. And what is our basic situation?

The Buddha described it in this sutta, which could be translated as the sutta on totality. And so I'll read you the gist of this sutta.

"Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That's pretty far out, isn't it? I haven't heard many other philosophers or teachers say that they will teach the totality of life, so that caught my attention.

"Listen and attend carefully. The totality is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who tried to describe a totality beyond this would not know of what they were speaking."

So this is the totality of our sense experience, isn't it? We've talked about this a number of times. These are the six senses and the organs that receive them. This is what makes up our human experience, and every part of our normal sense experience is included here.

One way of saying this is there are only ever six things happening. That's why it gets very simple in one way in our meditation. The basic experience for us as human beings is that things keep happening to us at these six sense doors. It doesn't matter if you're old or young or male or female or from any culture or race, if you're awakened or unawakened, this is our common shared experience. Things keep happening in the realm of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects.

So the word for this, these six kinds of things, the word that the Buddha used for this is contact. This is the sixth link in the chain of dependent origination. This is where we're picking up the chain. Five other things have already happened to us. We're not going to go into those, like how we got here and why contact is happening. But the reality is contact is happening at these six sense doors. That's what we pick up on.

Contact is defined really precisely in the Buddha's terms. It means the coming together of the sense organ, the sense object, and the sense consciousness. So for a sight to arise, there has to be an external object, my eye has to be working, and I have to have functioning sight consciousness. If I was asleep, my sight consciousness wouldn't be functioning.

Even if someone propped my eyes open, the sight consciousness might not be functioning. So when these three things come together—object, organ, and consciousness—there is this phenomenon called contact.

The next link in the chain is feeling tone, the Pali term vedana, which we've discussed extensively. This means that every one of these sense contacts has a feeling quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This is a crucial point in the Buddha's teachings. Why is feeling tone so important? Because it's on the basis of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral that our conditioned reactions arise. Greed is based in relation to pleasant feeling tones, aversion arises in relation to unpleasant feeling tones, and delusion often arises based on neutral feeling tones. The combination of these three reactions—greed, aversion, and delusion—is what we call craving or tanha, which is also the second noble truth.

As Sally mentioned, even though tanha, craving, has a desire nature, it includes the formation of aversion because that too expresses a preference. If we want things to be one way, we don't want them to be another. This desire force expresses itself both as greed—wanting the pleasant—and aversion—not wanting the unpleasant.

These formations happen constantly, and in normal life we don't see them happening. That's why they're usually accompanied by delusion. It's usually greed with delusion reacting, or aversion with delusion reacting, because we're not seeing them clearly. When we start to see them, that changes the whole equation.

Craving is the conditioned response to feeling tone, the next link in the chain of dependent origination. It flows from contact, which brings about feeling tone. Feeling tone conditions craving, which is the reactive

formation of greed, aversion, or delusion.

After craving comes something even more solidified. Craving identifies the object and inclines the mind in that direction. Then, if you pay attention, usually what happens is a fastening onto that particular object—either a fascination with its pleasant quality or its unpleasant quality. There's a taking hold that occurs, which is called grasping or clinging.

This grasping or clinging is simply a further solidification of the movement of craving. It's like: "Okay, I'm drawn there, I kind of like it—got it." If you watch how your mind relates to these charged objects with strong feeling tone, you can observe this happening. As the mind becomes more settled, you can see that inclination and then the taking hold of, called grasping or clinging.

Once we've taken hold, we tend to stay there for a while and often proliferate about it: "I like it, I don't like it, I want more of it, I've got to get rid of it, this is going to ruin my retreat, I can't have this in my life," and so on.

These are the central links in our experience of the chain: contact, feeling, craving, clinging. The key thing to understand is that clinging, once it has taken form, invariably leads to suffering. I'll explain that in a moment. But this is important to know—clinging is what provides the fuel for suffering to happen.

Here we are. We come into conscious experience when we're fairly young. You can think of it as being a baby, and all these objects start appearing in the world, forming our world of contacts: mother, breast, food, father, school, friends, high school, crushes, college, jobs, career, money, taxes, government, Britney Spears, VH1, income tax, Barack Obama, global economic crisis. It never stops.

Of all these objects that go by, some are very attractive, some are very scary. We end up moving in relation to them, taking hold, wanting. Even to push something away, we have to take hold of it first. If you want to get rid of a pain in your knee, mentally you've got to take hold of it before you can push against it. So clinging happens not just with things we want to bring close, but also with things we want to push away.

This is how we get entangled. Once entangled, suffering results.

What actually happens is that when we grasp something and hold on for a while and start to proliferate around it, we create a new kind of sense of "I" in that relationship. We could almost say we give birth by taking hold of and then proliferating. What's happening is a new sense of self is getting created in that movement.

The sense of self is always bound up with suffering because there's birth and death with this sense of self. Let me give a couple of examples.

I told a story earlier in the retreat of how I was going out for a walking meditation one morning while I was on retreat here. I looked down to my walking path and saw there was somebody already walking

there. Unpleasant, very unpleasant kind of contact. And I didn't like it, so there was immediately aversion, and then I started to proliferate about it.

So I made a big thing of it. I latched onto it, and I got angry at that person who was in my walking path. I thought all kinds of thoughts about why they shouldn't be there, and what could their motivation be for being in my walking path, and they weren't very sensitive. I proliferated about it for thirty minutes before I finally realized, hey, I'm angry. It took me that long. Once I realized I was angry, then I could kind of work with it.

But in the middle of that, I had constructed a new sense of self, which was the angry yogi. I was angry with one of my fellow yogis because he had appropriated something that belonged to me. So I took birth as the angry yogi. I sustained that birth for a whole thirty minutes by thinking about it more and dwelling on it and basically grasping the situation over and over and over again through my thoughts and feelings. Of course, there was a lot of delusion because I wasn't seeing it. There was a very solid taking of birth as an angry walker.

Then, when I could see what was happening, mindfulness came in and identified it as anger, I could release it. In just a few minutes, the anger passed and I was happily doing walking meditation. That angry yogi died then. He had a lifespan of about thirty minutes. He was very real. It was a very real formation of personality characteristics. Then he passed away. I took birth, lived out a lifespan—thirty minutes in this case—and then passed away.

So that was an example of an unpleasant birth, an unhappy birth. But there are other examples of happy births that also take place here every day.

You come in for a sitting. And all of a sudden, you notice the mind has gotten really still. Everything has just settled down. The body feels relaxed but very comfortable. You're fully present. There are not a lot of thoughts dragging you away. The body energy is settled. Not a lot of hindrances going on. Wherever you turn your attention, you can connect kind of effortlessly. Feel the breath. Pay attention to sounds. Open up to choiceless attention. And you're just there moment after moment with a sense of ease and peace.

And now you realize, this is what I always knew my meditation could be like. It's taken me three weeks, but I've figured it out. Now I know how to meditate. I know the secret to this stuff. Wow, this is going to be so much fun. I'm going to be able to go back into my daily life and carry on conversations like this. I'm going to be completely at ease. I won't be rattled by that next-door neighbor or my boss at work. Wow, I'm going to have so much power in my daily life.

And you think all of a sudden the concentration continues. Wow, I can think anything I want, and it's not disturbing this concentration. This is fabulous. And then let's take this out for a walk. So the bell rings, sitting ends. Go out for a walk with every step. Life is going to be so fantastic from now on. I can't believe this. Can't wait to get back to sit next time. Walk slowly into the hall, sit down. It's all gone. The body

energy is all stirred up.

Looking at this as a whole, we can recognize this cycle playing out throughout our entire day. From morning until night, we can observe countless different selves taking birth in response to the various experiences that unfold. Yet eventually we release each one. This is precisely why this process is called the wheel of samsara—we keep getting born into new identities, then letting go and passing away from them.

Upasaka Ki describes how, when we finally let go of whatever we've been clinging to and return to balance, we come back to what she calls "normal mind." This normal mind isn't what the outside world considers normal—we might wish it were! Rather, she calls it normal because it's the place meditators can discover again and again, making it our home base. This is our natural state of balance, though we certainly experience many ups and downs in between our returns to this center.

This quality of clinging—the fourth step in that sequence of contact, feeling, craving, clinging—is precisely where a new self solidifies. This raises a fascinating question: Where does the self actually come from? Is there some pre-existing self that does the grasping? Or is grasping itself simply another mental activity that creates the very sense of self?

Andrew Olendzki, director of the study center down the street, offers beautiful clarity on this point in one of his essays. He writes: "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds onto or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

Let me repeat that profound insight: Grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping.

This transforms our understanding completely. Every time we take hold of something—whether pleasant or unpleasant—we construct a new sense of self. There's the birth of a new "I" in a new form.

This principle becomes particularly clear when we consider how our minds typically function. The untrained mind is often compared to a monkey mind, and there's an image I find quite helpful of how a monkey travels through a forest. The monkey grabs hold of a vine and swings across on that vine, but generally won't let go of it until there's another vine within reach. Then it swings on that second vine until yet another vine becomes available to grasp.

When we observe the untrained mind—one that's not watching itself with awareness—this is exactly how we all tend to function.

We grab hold of something and don't let go until there's something else to grasp. This process of birthing into a new self happens over and over, moment after moment, with only very brief respites that offer a little pause.

So where is there any freedom in this? This chain that the Buddha laid out—contact, feeling, craving, clinging—he said was one of his most profound insights. The repetitive nature of this cycle is what keeps us on the wheel of samsara. Where is there freedom in it? Are we really doomed to go through this cycle again and again?

If there is some freedom in this cycle, that would be good to know, because not only would it lead to insight here and now, but it would bring the fruit of the path closer to us. Rather than expecting the fruit to come only after many lifetimes, if we could find the fruit of the path now, it would give us tremendous confidence and faith and trust in this process.

The question becomes: how is the chain to be interpreted? Can the chain be broken? Is it a strict causal sequence or only a conditioning sequence—a leading to, but not always?

The right understanding is that the chain is not a strict causal sequence. It is a leading to, not necessarily causal. Classically, where the chain can be broken is between feeling and craving.

This is important to understand. If there's enough mindfulness—and I know you all have experienced this in your meditations here—can you be with a pleasant feeling and not move into greed? Has everybody experienced that? If there's an unpleasant contact, unpleasant feeling tone, can you be with that and not move into aversion? I've heard it a lot in interviews. If there's a neutral experience, can you be with that and not be oblivious, not space out, not go into delusion? I think all of you have experienced those moments in this retreat.

This is really a key point in our practice. This is a point we could call acceptance, non-reactivity, equanimity—where we're fully with the experience of the feeling tone, but we don't move into the reactive formations, we don't move into craving.

You are finding out in your direct experience that it's possible to be with feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and not have craving arise in the next moment. This is revolutionary. This is what can get us off the wheel.

It's vital to become familiar with what this feels like, because this place is the sweet spot in meditation. Meditation goes best when we can be there. The more we contact it and recognize it, the easier it is to find that place.

You could call it the place of non-craving. You could call it the place of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. You could call it the place of temporary nibbana, as Sally mentioned last night.

One Buddhist teacher put it this way: the whole of the Buddhist path is resting in this gap between feeling and craving. Finding this place where feeling is present and you're fully with it, you're really aware, you're totally mindful, but it doesn't lead into craving. That's the place to rest. The whole of the path is resting there.

Start to recognize this. Start to explore it. What does that feel like? People will have different descriptions. You might say it feels easeful, spacious, restful, non-conflicted, light. But the word I want to emphasize here is that this place feels free. We can start to feel the freedom that's available when we're not caught in reactive formations.

Resting in that gap is the path, as this teacher said, but it's also in some way our goal. The definition of nibbana expressed by Sariputta in the suttas is the destruction of greed, aversion, and delusion. Well, we're resting in a place where, relatively at least, greed, aversion, and delusion are absent. So we're getting a little foretaste of this total experience of nibbana.

This freedom is like the nibbana of an awakened one. It's not as full, it's not as complete, it's not finished, but it's a little bit of the same stuff. It's the path and it's also the goal.

As we start to feel into it, recognize it, and access it more, it starts to expand. More of our practice comes from this place that feels like a fruition—feels like an end point, not a total end point, but a kind of reaching of an end point.

Something else about this resting place: feeling tone is there, but we're not reacting out of blind conditioning. Greed, aversion, and delusion are blindly conditioned reactions. We're not reacting out of those. So somehow the mind has found a place that's not being determined by the conditions. The conditions would say, "Oh, you should go now to greed, aversion, delusion." But our mind isn't being determined by that. We're not being forced into that conditioning.

So we've also found something in here that is less conditioned, leaning toward the unconditioned nature of things. We're not being determined by the conditions—we've stepped out of the conditions to a certain extent—and so we've touched a little bit on the unconditioned, which is a synonym for the Dhamma. So we start to see this resting place as a kind of dhammic way to be, and then conditioned things go on at the same time. They don't necessarily interfere with that.

This is a quote from Ajahn Chah. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable—material and immaterial, big and small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are—as transient, imperfect and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we

attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

So resting in this gap, we can be at peace, and yet all the conditioned world is still unfolding. We're not caught up in it. We're at rest. We're at peace, but we're also fully aware. And by resting, not grasping, we're not giving rise to a new sense of I. So we're not taking a new birth at that point. We're not creating a new self with this rest. So not taking birth, we're also not subject to dying.

There's this kind of sweet sequence in the Sutta Nipata where a bunch of young brahmins come to ask questions of the Buddha. In that day, the brahmins were the religious elite, and the wanderers—like the Buddha and other ascetics—were kind of outside the realm of normal society. And so the brahmins tended to look down on them. So when young brahmins would come to ask questions of the Buddha, it was just kind of a sweet stepping out of their social role because they had a deep spiritual interest and weren't so concerned with the social role at that point.

So this is one brahmin youth asking his question. His name is Todeyya. He asked the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you have loved to ask this question? What is that liberation like?

And the Buddha replied, "That sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming."

So again, this pointing to unentangled nature.

Ajahn Chah had a nice gloss on this concept of becoming. You can imagine him giving a Dharma talk in Thailand. The Dharma talks were usually given in outdoor halls. They had a floor, they had a roof, and they had pillars supporting the roof, but they didn't have walls. They weren't closed in because the temperature was so mild they could just let the air come and go. So imagine Ajahn Chah giving a talk in an outdoor sala, a hall like that.

And he would point and say, "The roof is a becoming, the floor is a becoming, but in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. There's no becoming. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness." And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbāna is this emptiness.

So when we rest in this gap, we're not becoming. We're not taking a stand. We're not taking a stand on any of the sense phenomena that are coming our way. In that, there's a kind of empty place. And in that emptiness, we're not being born. And so we're not subject to death.

This is from Ajahn Jomian, another Thai Forest teacher: "The best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless." From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless.

Oh, and yet, we're still fully aware—full presence, full knowing, all the sense phenomena are in contact.

So by balancing in this place, this gap between feeling and craving, we're moving into a place of unbecoming, which has an undying and unconditioned quality.

One of my teachers in Thailand, another Thai Forest teacher, was Ajahn Buddhadāsa. He was one of the great masters in Thailand in the last half of the last century. He seemed always to be resting in this place. I never saw him move out of this place.

Frankly, it kind of disturbed me as I was getting to know him because he was very accessible in those days. He was kind of iconoclastic. He had a habit of speaking his mind, and whether that was against the government or the military or the social order, he'd just tell it the way he saw it.

In the days that I was there, he was always available to us as monks or to the visitors who came to the monastery. After breakfast, he would just sit on this stone bench that was outside his little house. And the forest chickens would come out, and they'd be scratching around in the dirt at his feet. The temple dogs would be wandering around. A couple of them would be lying at his feet.

These temple dogs, I swear, they always could smell a Westerner. They'd bark at us and bite at us, but they'd let the Thai monks go by. So it was always a little bit of a challenge to go up and visit with Ajahn Buddhadāsa. You never knew if you were going to get attacked by a temple dog.

But if I wanted to ask him a question about Dharma, I could just go up basically any day and visit with him there. I could go up, make my three bows, and then address him. And his expression never changed. I'd make my bows, I'd start to ask my question. He wouldn't say, "Oh, how nice to see you today," or "Is your practice going well?" or "Could I get you a cup of tea?" He's not like a Western Vipassana teacher. He was just sitting there watching everything arise and pass away, observing all the phenomena of his senses, and he was observing me too.

So at first I took it as a rejection. He's not being at all friendly. He doesn't want me here. But I'd stay and ask my question. He wasn't impatient at all. And it took me a long time to realize that if I wanted to hang out there for quite a while and talk Dharma, I could. But normally I got intimidated and I thought, he doesn't want me here. So I'd get up and go.

But he was equanimous about the arisings and passings. And he was equanimous about my arising and passing. He didn't care if I came, asked questions, or went away. It was just all the same to him. So he rested in this great balance. And looking back, I really admire him for that.

At some point in one's meditation practice, it can become skillful to make a little bit of a shift. We start off looking very closely at the objects of the senses.

It's really important in Vipassana meditation that we become quite skilled at looking at the six sense doors and their associated objects so that we see how we can get caught and entangled with each one. It's only

through clear investigation of sense phenomena that we learn how not to get caught.

When we've grown somewhat skillful at noticing and being mindful of different sense objects, sometimes the question arises: I've become pretty fluent with objects—what's the subject side like? In other words, there's all this awareness happening, and usually we focus it on knowing objects, but what about the quality of awareness itself? Here I'll use awareness as a broad kind of mindfulness, a knowing of objects in an expansive way—not so much focusing on particulars, but on this faculty that knows in a comprehensive manner.

We start to realize that objects are not ultimately where fulfillment lies. They cannot satisfy. If we cling, we suffer. None of them will give lasting happiness. The quality of awareness itself becomes more interesting as time goes by, and we might want to direct more of our attention there.

I want to briefly discuss two approaches for doing this—two meditation methods I mentioned that lead toward placing awareness on awareness itself.

The first is a practice we've alluded to several times, which I want to spell out more clearly. I learned this from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: the process of checking regularly on our attitude, which is his term for our relationship to whatever experience we're having in that moment.

We've discussed this—checking whether there's greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind. This is what he recommends. Simply carry on with meditation, being mindful of arisings and passings, with your anchor—breath, body, sounds, choiceless attention, whatever. Then turn and ask: what's my relationship to those experiences? Is there greed, aversion, or delusion in my relationship to them?

This isn't always easy to see, so he suggests three simple questions. To check for greed, ask: "Am I wanting something else to happen?" To check for aversion: "Am I wanting something to stop happening?" And to check for delusion: "Am I not in touch with what's happening?" Usually by the time you ask about being in touch, you're already back in touch. The answer to delusion is usually no. But very often we discover, yes, I would like something to happen—I want more peace in this sitting. Or I want something to stop—I don't want this pain or wandering mind to continue.

If you see greed, aversion, or delusion, don't be judgmental about those reactions. Simply make that reaction the new subject for mindfulness. Don't judge it, don't try to push it away or make it disappear. Just include it as part of your experience now. Be mindful of that.

When I first started practicing this way, I was doing choiceless attention practice, but perhaps every ten minutes—maybe five times per sitting—I would turn and check my attitude. As I grew more comfortable with it, I could check without so much internal dialogue. I wouldn't need to go through elaborate questions. Having practiced it repeatedly, I could simply turn inward and see if there was greed, aversion, or delusion present.

Then I became more interested in this investigation. I really saw there was tremendous depth to this question of how I was relating. So I started checking more often—ten times per sitting. Eventually I realized that if my mind was steady, this could become my main practice. If I didn't need sense objects to steady the mind, if there was inherent steadiness, I could remain tuned in to the arising of greed, aversion, or delusion.

By staying attuned to this, I was more often able to see these patterns arising, and often that very seeing, when the pattern was weak, would release it. It became a very helpful way to center myself and not get carried away so much by greed, aversion, and delusion.

Upasika Kee says the same thing: "Your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. You have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that is so worth checking on."

This, then, is Sayadaw U Tejaniya's practice of checking on attitude, and eventually it can become the primary practice when the mind is stable.

So this is one approach. The second approach in meditation is to turn awareness toward awareness itself.

As you're sitting here now, let your eyes roam if they're open, or your ears if they're open, to all the objects in the room. Notice the beautiful things and the things that are not so appealing—the nice sconces on the walls, the shiny faces of the yogis who have been in retreat for three weeks already. You're getting more beautiful every day. Notice the texture of the floor and the walls, and anything that's unpleasant that you might react to. Just let your eyes latch on and delight and play with that field of pleasant and unpleasant.

Now, instead of sending that attention outward, what if it's turned back on the awareness itself? Or you might say the source of the knowing. Does that feel any different? You've been out, out, out, out, out—awareness going out through the eyes, latching on to things, getting involved, liking, disliking. Now you come back and you turn it inward, back toward awareness itself. Does it feel any different? Do you feel a shift when you do that?

Sometimes people say that brings a little sense of relief, a little sense of ease, a sense of disentangling, a sense of spaciousness, of stepping back, of settling down a little. You can play with it in your meditation. Sometimes it offers a way that we can unhook from a fixation on sense objects, coming back into awareness itself.

This is not a simple meditation instruction like "notice the sensation of your breath at the nose." This quality of looking at awareness is very subtle. I think it's the most subtle way to look in meditation, so it may not be so apparent at first. That's okay. Just play with it over time if it appeals to you.

Different phrases are used to suggest this, and different ones might work better for you than others. Some

are: turn your attention to awareness, become aware of awareness, turn awareness back on itself. Or sometimes you might ask the question: who is aware? Or what is knowing? There's all this going out, knowing, liking, disliking, sense objects, pleasure, pain. Then ask, who's knowing? And just come back inside and feel how that settles.

"The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness." This is Upasaka Ki's description of the way to this unentangled knowing. In this language, we send our awareness outside when we get involved in sense contact. And outside in this case means not just the objects outside us, but even the body and even the thoughts and moods that are inside, quote unquote, that are part of mind objects. We stay just with the awareness itself. Anything else is outer.

"The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside.

This inward turning doesn't mean that we cut off from the world. When you ask a question like "who is knowing?" or "what is aware?" or turn awareness to awareness, do you lose contact with your senses? Do you lose touch with the world? No. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, feelings—they all still come. But it's as though we've moved into a little different center of gravity. And it's a center that's not bound to whether things are there or not. But if we need to relate, we're still in touch. We're in touch from an even more peaceful place.

If you like, you can play with this. We're going to do another meditation in a couple of days that will give another avenue into this, probably an easier way in. But for now, if you'd like to play with the sense of turning toward awareness, do it sometime when you feel a little stuck. Some kind of greed has caught in, some kind of aversion. You feel entangled. There's contraction. There's something unpleasant. Turn to the knower or the knowing. I'm just using knower as "who is knowing," not that there's someone there. Turn to the knowing. Turn to awareness. See if you can feel that.

And see how that feels in relation to this place of being caught, being entangled, hanging on to something.

When the Buddha was visited by these Brahmin youths, this is another question from another young man named Kappa: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replied: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death.

Thank you for listening.

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