Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:48

The nature of our spiritual journey is that we are traveling from something that we could call suffering or bondage to a state of release or freedom. As we make this journey, it's really important that we become acquainted with both halves of this traverse.

We spend a lot of time, certainly early in retreat, exploring the nature of how we're caught. We spend a lot of time with the first two noble truths, a lot of time with the hindrances and the afflictive emotions, a lot of time looking at greed, aversion, and delusion. As the retreat progresses, it's important that we also give good care and attention to the second half of the journey, which is the nature of freedom.

Tonight I want to talk about freedom—how it is both a goal of our practice, but also how the discovery of it becomes our path. Freedom becomes both a path and a goal along this journey.

The subject of tonight's talk is called "Unentangled Knowing." It's from a phrase by a lay woman teacher in Thailand named Upasika Ki. Upasika simply means lay woman supporter. She had a meditation center and taught, which was rather unusual for a lay woman in Thailand. She started in the 1950s and taught into the 1970s. Her teachings have been collected in what I consider a very beautiful and inspiring book called *Pure and Simple*. I'll be reading a couple of quotes from her tonight.

This phrase, "unentangled knowing," is the way her translator, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, explains her instruction. For those who aren't native speakers of English, this is a very unusual word, so let me explain it for a moment. A tangle is a twisted mass of strands like hair or string that happens when they all get knotted up together and snarled. Like if you have long hair and ride in a convertible, then come to the end and try to put a comb through it—you can't because it's gotten tangled. "Entangle" is the verb of making that tangle happen. "Unentangle" is making it all come straight again after being tangled. So this is a kind of knowing that leads to unentanglement.

Here is the line from Upasika Ki that we'll return to later: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside."

The image of the tangle appears often in the Buddha's teachings. It refers to the way that our desires and our fears meet with the objects of the world and get us caught and ensnared and bound with conflicting wants and fears and hopes. One line from the Buddha points to this: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn."

There's another quite famous quotation that comes from the Samyutta Nikaya and forms part of the Visuddhimagga, a sixth-century commentarial text. Somebody comes to the Buddha and asks him a

question: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama this question: Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

Here we have again this process of unentanglement that needs to take place for our journey. It means all our inner conflicts and the ways that we're knotted up inside, bound up with different forces of craving, need to come apart and be released for the mind and the body to be clear and straight.

The Buddha's answer to this question was that the one who succeeds in disentangling the tangle is one who develops sila, samadhi, and panna—virtue, meditation, and wisdom—which is what we're doing here. So you're all on the way.

Unentangled knowing is a phrase that Upasika Ki uses to refer to a state of mind that is very aware, very mindful of what's happening, but isn't enmeshed or entangled with the objects of our experience. Tonight I want to communicate something of what that feels like or looks like.

This is not a meditation technique. I wish it were that simple, that we could just say a few words and you could go to the technique. It's more of a pointing to a state of mind and a relationship. So hopefully by these pointings, it might give you some hints in your practice of how to find this state of being. It's really a state of mind or a state of being that constitutes a relationship to our experience. It's not as simple as saying "place your attention on the breath."

All the different quotations and passages I read are hints at what this is like. I think that these moments of being unentangled happen to all of us here many times during a day, but we may not be prepared to notice it. So I also want through this talk to encourage you simply to notice when this way of being is present and to appreciate the quality of freedom that is inherent in it. This is also an encouragement to discover the freedom that can be there along the way—freedom as we journey.

But before we talk about freedom in more detail, I want to discuss this question of bondage in a little more detail. How is it that we get caught? How is it that we get tangled up in the world of appearances?

The Buddha described this in great detail in a teaching that he called Dependent Origination. In the teaching of Dependent Origination, he outlined twelve links...

sometimes depicted as a circle that explain in a moment-by-moment basis how suffering arises and we get caught in it.

Now, parts of this chain—for it's referred to as a chain of these twelve links—are somewhat philosophical. They're very interesting, but I don't want to go into the philosophy so much tonight. Instead, I'm going to focus on the experiential component, which comprises roughly the four middle links of the chain. There are four links that form the heart: five previous links, then these four links, and then three further links. I'm going to focus on the four links that are the heart of dependent origination because they really point to our experience.

In order to look at this closely, I want to ask a question and invite you to reflect on our basic situation as sentient beings. What's a basic situation that sentient beings share, or that we as human beings all share?

One way I would describe it—something that's true in every moment of conscious experience—is that we are constantly having sense experience through the six sense doors. This is true for you, it's true for me, it's true for Buddhas, it's true for unenlightened beings. We are continually having sense experience through the six sense doors. And it is out of this experience that we become caught, that we become bound.

The Buddha described this beautifully in a sutta called the Sutta on Totality. He was talking with a group of monks and said, "Monks, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That's quite a statement. Not many teachers have said something like that. Freud couldn't say that. Einstein couldn't say that. Karl Marx couldn't say that. The Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of things."

So he said, "And what is the totality of life? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, and the mind and objects of mind. Anyone who would describe a totality beyond these six would not be describing something they knew anything about."

So this is it, isn't it? This is the field of human experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—primarily thoughts and emotions.

It gets pretty simple when you look at it this way. Joseph Goldstein is fond of saying, "There are only ever six things happening. That's all there is." And yet all the complexity of modern life and all the tangle of our inner experience is built around our relation to these six things.

Each of these expresses itself through—and I think we've talked about this before—a moment of contact. In a moment of contact, there is the coming together of the sense object, the sense organ, and the sense consciousness. So when your eyes are open, you may see the front wall. That's a sight. Your eye is working so that image appears, and your consciousness holds it, reveals it, knows it, displays it to you.

This moment of contact has with it a valence, a feeling tone that the Buddha called vedanā, whose nature is to be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

So this is the operative experience that we are dealing with moment after moment from a dharmic point of view. We are constantly being, you might say, assaulted with these experiences at the six sense doors, most of which we have no control over and which always continue to alternate in their qualities of being pleasant, sometimes intensely so, or painful, sometimes intensely so, or neutral.

It's no wonder this kind of drives us crazy. How do we hold ourselves in equilibrium knowing that at any moment we could be met with intense pleasure or intense pain or neutrality? This is the challenge of

being human, and it's why we get so disturbed by all the arisings at the sense doors.

We talked quite a bit earlier in the retreat about the importance—the critical importance—of this feeling tone. Because it's the basis for the reactive states of mind. If the feeling tone is pleasant, it conditions a quality of holding on or desire. If the feeling tone is unpleasant, it tends to condition a reactive formation of aversion, of wanting to push away. And if the feeling tone is neutral, it tends to condition a reaction of delusion. We don't pay attention because it's neither gratifying nor threatening. We say, "It doesn't have anything to do with me. I can just space out on this one."

So these qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion are all triggered by this element of feeling tone.

This then gives rise to the next link in the chain of dependent arising. It is said that feeling conditions the arising of craving. Remember that craving, although it sounds like a desire force, actually means the preference of the mind. Craving can mean wanting what's presented, or it can mean not wanting what's presented—preferring something else. Desire and aversion are two sides, really, of the same coin, which is having a preference.

So we're kind of, in this habitual way, always reacting to our experience. "I like this. Let me keep it. I don't like that."

Let me push it away. Or there's the delusion of simply ignoring what's arising, turning away from it altogether. This is the next step in the chain of dependent origination called craving, which then leads to the following link: clinging.

On a moment-to-moment basis, clinging is understood to always follow right after craving. It's simply a matter of building up and intensifying. The mind turns and relates to some pleasant or unpleasant experience. An urge arises—either to hold onto it or push it away. Then the next thing that happens is we actually take hold of that object with the mind in some way, which is the act of clinging.

Once there's clinging, suffering is an inevitable result. So the chain goes: contact, feeling, craving, clinging—and I'll skip a couple of steps because there's more than I want to get into right now—leading to suffering. And then it picks up again. "Okay, we got caught on that one. Here comes another one. Here's more contact, another opportunity for feeling, craving, and clinging." This is how the wheel keeps turning and how we get hooked on the round of samsara.

Each of these moments of clinging gives birth to a kind of "I." You can see this if you look at the history of your life as a person. We come into the world as young babies. Consciousness is very open. But these delightful and threatening experiences start happening: mother, love, breast, food, school, teacher, graduation, work, taxes, death—you know, Britney Spears, all the rest of it. This whole parade of objects goes by us. Some of them are very seductive and some of them are very threatening. So the mind is always, just by its conditioned habits, reeling from this changing array. And as we form grasping or clinging to these things—either to the pleasant or to the unpleasant—we take birth as a new "I."

Let me give a couple of simple examples of this in the retreat setting. Yesterday there was a very nice tea—the potato bar. There were baked potatoes and a whole range of toppings: butter and sour cream and cheese and chives. You could just lay on as much as you wanted. And then I thought, "What about the poor eight-precept yogis who have innocently come down to the dining hall looking for their little glass of filtered juice with no solid substance at all, and they get a whiff of the potato bar?" Oh, that's potential for suffering.

I could imagine if I had been an eight-precept yogi yesterday, coming in and seeing the potato bar and thinking, "I haven't been eating very much this whole retreat. I've been pretty hungry since about four o'clock today, and I have a glass of filtered juice to look forward to. There's the potato bar. It smells so good. It looks so good. I'd really like to have it, but I'm not going to. I can't have it because I'm observing my eight precepts. But I really wish I could." And then we start thinking about how good that would taste, or other kinds of food that we might like. Pretty soon we've taken birth as the hungry yogi.

We can be born in that state for like an hour. You can think about food for quite a long time on a retreat like this. So we take birth as the hungry yogi, and then sometime later—maybe by the time we go to the sitting, or during the sitting—we let it go. And the hungry yogi, which is not far from a hungry ghost, passes away. So there's been a birth and a death over that hour.

In that case, we have a kind of painful birth. It's not much fun to be hungry and desirous for an hour, feeling like you're missing out on all the good stuff. There's a painful birth, but death may be welcome because it's an escape from this hungry "I."

But the other side is this: suppose you come in and you have a really good sitting. It's very clear, you're very present—not very pleasant, sorry—very present, without many distracting thoughts. You feel a certain degree of stillness and strength in your mindfulness. You're able to be with things moment by moment and not get disturbed by thoughts and emotions. You start to realize, "Oh, this is the factor of concentration that people have talked about."

And my body feels pretty relaxed. My mind feels steady. There are not a lot of hindrances coming up. This is a pretty pleasant state. You think, "I knew this kind of sitting was going to happen sometime this retreat, and I finally got it. Now I'm in the groove. I've got the retreat really going now."

And then the bell rings. It's time to get up and walk. You do your walking, but you sort of can't wait to come back because the next sitting is going to be so good again. Of course, you come back, and what's that sitting inevitably like? Concentration gone, restless thoughts, a lot of emotion, mind can't find the breath or the body, and it's really difficult. There is expectation, disappointment, struggle—"I can't accept this, this is not the way it's meant to be. What did I do wrong?" We start blaming ourselves and judging ourselves.

So here, we took birth as the concentrated yogi, and we thought that birth was going to continue. We

thought we'd have a nice long life as the concentrated yogi. We couldn't wait to get back and live another round. But we come into the hall and the concentrated yogi is gone. That pleasant birth has ended, and that dying is painful.

So here it was a pleasant birth, but a painful passing. In any case, if we cling based on pleasure or pain, there's suffering as a result. Either the birth is pleasant and the death is painful, or the birth is painful and the death is welcome. Either way, there's suffering. This is the result of clinging. We either suffer soon or we suffer later due to change, due to impermanence. So clinging doesn't lead to happiness. We can see that again and again on a moment-by-moment basis.

What we start to see is this very act of taking hold of something in our experience, whether it's the smell of the potato bar or the experience of the concentrated mind. Once we take hold of it, in some way we've set up a self, and that self is always involved in birth and death.

Andrew Olenski, who's the executive director of the study center in Barre, 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."

So grasping takes place—it's another activity that doesn't require a self, but it generates the self, the sense of self. It's not that grasping is done by the self, but rather self is done by grasping or created by grasping.

Before we come to meditation, and this is true I think of most people in the world, we don't know any other way than to cling. We cling to one thing and generally only let it go when there's something else to switch the clinging to. So life is a succession of these cycles of dependent arising where clinging is just done over and over and over again. That's why life without meditation feels so tiring, so exhausting—like we're just on this round over and over again.

The analogy that's used in the tradition is of a monkey. You've probably heard the mind described as monkey mind—it's just always running. One of the analogies is that a monkey, as it swings through the branches of the jungle, holds on to a vine and won't let go of one vine until it's got another one to hold on to. That's what the monkey mind does in our daily life.

Ajahn Chah made the comment that even in spiritual life, seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing that we're clinging but not being able to let go. So I'm sure you feel this a lot. You know there's some struggle, you know there's holding, and it's not possible to release. This factor of clinging is around a lot.

But as meditators, we do find another choice starts to open up. We do find there's a possibility.

And we can find it by looking into this chain of dependent arising. Contact is inevitable. We have contact, the Buddha had contact, enlightened beings have contact. That's going to keep happening at the six sense

doors—alternating pleasant and painful. Feeling, therefore, happens. An alternation of pleasant and unpleasant happens for Buddhas, happens for us.

But the next step is not necessary. Feeling does not have to give rise to craving. It's possible for us to know the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral quality of contact and not move into greed, aversion or delusion. This is a very important point. This is where the chain of dependent origination can be cut.

If there is enough mindfulness, enough steadiness of mind, we don't have to form a reaction to the feeling. And then we can, as it were, rest in that gap. There opens up a space between feeling and craving. The non-reactive state feels like spaciousness. And this is the opening into equanimity.

So we discover a new possibility that wasn't there before we looked closely. You could call it equanimity. You could call it acceptance. It means that we can be with pain and not have to hate it. It means we can be with the pleasant and not have to hold on to it. We accept their coming and we accept their going and we don't get disturbed.

This really becomes the sweet spot in meditation. This is the place where if you look in your meditation and you don't find greed and you don't find aversion and you don't find delusion, the meditation takes place much more easily. One teacher said the whole of the Buddha's path consists of resting in the gap between feeling and craving. The whole of the path is resting in that space between feeling and craving.

So we can start to explore what that feels like. When feelings are present but you're not reacting to them, you're fully aware but non-reactive, what does that feel like? Generally, it feels comfortable. But the quality that I want us to start tuning into is the freedom of it.

Because here the mind is not being driven by conditions. Generally, the untrained mind is completely driven by the changing conditions. With pleasure, we act with greed. With pain, we act with aversion. But now all of a sudden we're discovering that conditions can be there and we're not driven by them—that the mind can find a place that's not fixed by the conditions that accompany it. And this is what freedom's about. Freedom is finding a place that's not determined by these conditions.

Ajahn Chah talks about this as seeing conditioned things as conditioned things and seeing the Dhamma as the Dhamma. I'm going to read a little section from one of his teachings. It's a little long, so I hope you can stay with it because there's a nice pointing here:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or 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 directly."

So this is Ajahn Chah's pointer for stepping out of conditions, stepping out of conditioned things. And this is what in the Thai forest tradition they call the deathless. This gap between feeling and craving is not the source of a new birth.

There's no "I" emerging because there's no grasping happening. This gap is always available. It's a space that can be found in any moment, in every moment. And that's why it's talked about as deathless. It doesn't partake of birth and death. So we can always tune to it when we like.

There's a dialogue that the Buddha had. In the Sutta Nipata, a group of Brahmin youths come and they each ask the Buddha the most important question that they've been holding. One Brahmin youth asks the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you have liked to ask the Buddha that? What's it like on your side for one who is freed?

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

I want to share again this quote I mentioned in an earlier talk by Ajahn Chah on becoming. He was giving a Dharma talk, probably in an open-air hall. Open-air halls in Thailand have roofs and floors, but there are no outside walls—just pillars holding up the roof. It was probably a setting like that.

So Ajahn Chah was speaking and he said, "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. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness."

So the deathless is this place where we're not becoming. That means we haven't taken birth by grabbing hold of something. Resting in that gap means that we're in something that's unborn and uncreated, an open kind of space.

This is from Ajahn Chimney, another teacher in the Thai forest tradition: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the word he used here was mahasati: maha means great, sati means mindfulness, so a great mindfulness—"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."

So can we start to recognize this quality in our experience, in our meditation, of not having taken birth?

The quality of resting in that space between feeling and craving, where the reactive formations are not happening.

The Buddha said that the path, the Eightfold Path, has the deathless as its ground, destination, and goal. To me, that indicates the path itself partakes of this freedom. The path has the deathless as its ground. The path comes out of the deathless. So this resting in the deathless is both a freedom here and now that we can experience—have the fruit here and now—but it's also part of the path, meaning that the more we rest there, the more that furthers the journey to the final freedom, the final liberation.

The path and the goal come close together. And you can start to feel this as you develop that ability to rest, that there's a satisfaction in that. There's a kind of fulfillment in that ease.

One of my teachers in Thailand was a great forest monk named Ajahn Buddhadasa. He was both a scholar and a meditator. He was resting in this place a lot. His mind was very unmoved by changing circumstances. And as a young monk, I found that kind of disorienting, because I would come up to talk to him, ask him a question or something. And he wasn't like a Western Vipassana teacher who welcomes you into the room and makes sure you're settled and gives you a tissue if you need one—very welcoming and friendly.

Ajahn Buddhadasa never really moved out of his meditation. So I came up and he just sort of held me in his meditation. I was another arising in his consciousness, and he was neither drawn toward me nor repelled by me. But I wasn't used to this kind of coolness as a way of relating, and I thought he just wanted me to go away.

Later we arranged to have regular teachings with him, and I felt his metta more in that exchange. But in my early exchanges with him, I didn't feel that there was a metta attitude toward me, and I felt like I was imposing on him. It was only after I got to know him better I realized he was just holding me like he held everything.

He didn't mind if I was there. I could have stayed there all morning. There were roosters that gathered around his feet and hopped up on his bench. He didn't mind them either. There were some dogs that sat around his feet who loved to bark at the Western monks. I swear they could tell that we didn't really belong there, and they would hound us. But he didn't mind them either.

So he didn't mind me, but I couldn't pick up on that. He was just meditating with me. He was unentangled by my being there.

One starts to see that this ability to rest in this way, to not fall into reactive formations, depends on two things that we've been cultivating all along: samatha and vipassana.

Samatha is the quality of tranquility that develops naturally out of all the practices we've been doing, whether you're doing meditation on breath or body, or choiceless attention, or one of the brahmaviharas.

All of these serve to calm down the mind-body system. Normally when Westerners come into meditation, we've been very amped up by our culture. Our culture is overly speedy in terms of a harmonious way to live. And as members of that culture, we've all gotten mostly too speedy before we come into meditation. That's why it's so hard for the mind to slow down when we first start to sit. It's busy, busy, busy. It's hard to stop the thinking mind. If we look within our body, we often find the same thing. The bodily energy is going a little too fast.

When we come into meditation, we have a big history of doing, and sometimes it's very hard to stop the mental doing and come to any tranquility. But moment by moment, just making touch with the present moment, relaxing in the present moment, allowing it, the mind starts to slow down. This is the quality of samatha. And as you have all slowed over the course of these three weeks, there's a lot more natural mindfulness that comes. You notice sometimes it feels like you're effortlessly present. You can just be here and notice things moment after moment without a lot of work. That kind of effortless mindfulness comes out of this base of samatha or tranquility. That's needed in order to have this experience of resting without becoming reactive.

The other thing that's needed is the quality of vipassana or insight, seeing things clearly. Our practice is designed to encourage you to examine the objects that come at the six sense doors again and again to see what they're like, to see that they're of the nature to arise and pass away, that they're not self or owned by self. And especially to examine the energy of the hindrances and not to get so caught or reactive with mind states of fear or sadness or loneliness or wanting, just to allow those to also come and go, to know them clearly, but not to get caught in a struggle with them.

So this careful examination of all the arisings at the six sense doors really gives us an intimate familiarity with our experience so that when the samatha collects, the understanding collects, we're able to abide in the midst of all these changing phenomena and not be pulled out by them, not have to get entangled with them out of confusion, out of wanting, or out of resistance.

This is not a practice that someone could walk in at the beginning of a meditation retreat and fall into, this kind of resting and open knowing. But it is a practice that some of you are experiencing now. I hear descriptions of it in the interviews. That's why I wanted to talk about it tonight.

There are a few different meditation approaches that lend well to this quality of open attention without getting caught up. We've talked about all of these in little ways. I just want to do a review.

One of them is the practice we've learned from Sayadaw U Tejaniya of checking the attitudes. Do you remember this practice? We're noticing things at the sense doors, and we very often check: how am I relating to those things? Am I relating out of greed, aversion, or delusion? We check by asking ourselves simple questions.

To check greed, we say: am I wanting something to be happening that isn't? To check aversion, we ask: am

I resisting something that's happening and want it to stop? To check delusion, we ask: am I not in touch with what's happening?

There's a very simple way. Ask these three questions and we can find out if the mind is in a reactive place or if we're relating wisely to the things that are coming and going. Generally, when one starts this practice, one might be connecting in choiceless attention or with a chosen object, using that to anchor the attention in the present, and then turning back regularly to check the attitude. Could be five times a sit in the beginning. And then you can do it more often. You can do it ten times a sitting. And then you can do it more often. So that eventually, your main practice, especially as this quality of resting develops, can be: is the mind in a reactive formation or not? Or is the mind in this place of freedom?

This also resonates really well with Upasika Kee, who puts it this way: your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. This means watching the mind states, the reactive formations of mind.

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. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on.

Do you get the sense of that—that you can just kind of abide with taking a look at where the mind is going in relation to the things that are arising? Am I trying to hold on, to grab closer, to push away? Am I ignoring? Just keep looking.

Ajahn Chah has a nice metaphor for this. He's talking about looking at all the different states of mind that come and how they get attached to objects. He said, "If you want to see a train, just go to the central station. You don't have to go traveling all the way up the northern line, the southern line, the eastern line, and the western line to see all the trains. If you want to see trains, every single one of them, you'd be better off waiting at Grand Central Station. That's where they all end. Just look right here," he pointed at his heart, "at Central Station. Greed arises here. Anger arises here. Delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch all these things arise. Practice right here because right here is where you're stuck. Right here is where the determination arises, where conventions arise, and right here is where the Dhamma will arise."

So this is a practice direction: just stay at the heart and notice its movements.

When I practiced with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, he was so firm on this point. I said to him, "You know, I could observe the movements of the hindrances much better if I followed the breath for a while. Can I just follow the breath for a while?" And he said, "No."

"But my mind would really be a lot steadier and I could pay better attention. Can I just follow the breath?" "No."

He insisted, for me anyway, just to stay there watching the movements of the mind. That was the only practice he would let me do.

The second of the approaches we talked about quite a bit before—it's an open awareness where you turn the attention to awareness itself. But I want to give another image for it. We talked about it as a sky before in the guided meditation, but another image that's helpful I first heard from someone who teaches children.

One of our Sangha members runs a Dharma preschool. If you live in Marin and have children who aren't in school yet, it's like a heaven realm for your kids, because she has about twenty kids and all the parents are into meditation and have given her permission to run this preschool as basically a Dharma training for these young kids. So she teaches them yoga. They do spiritual stories together and they meditate in silence together. These three-to-five-year-old kids, she says, will stay silent for like thirty minutes at a time because the atmosphere is so inviting. And it's not a strict silence—if they want to talk, they can come up and sit on her lap and whisper in her ear, so they know they have some outlet.

So she teaches them meditation, usually after she does some yoga. She'll have them lie down. But she says with children, you can't use words like "awareness" and "mindfulness"—that's too abstract. Or even "emotions"—that word is too abstract. So she uses the image of a pond.

She says, "Lie down and imagine that you're in the middle of a big pond and all these fish are swimming through it. You can watch the fish come and go. There might be a happy fish that swims through. There might be a sad fish that swims through. There might be a loving fish. There might be an angry fish. Just be the water and let all the fish swim through you. And it's no problem."

At the end of one meditation, this little boy who was, I think, five years old, raised his hand and he said, "I have a problem."

And she said, "What's that?"

He said, "I can't let the angry fish come."

And she said, "Well, why is that? What happens?"

And he said, "Well, when I forget that I'm the water, the angry fish makes me do things that hurt other people."

So this image of water is actually quite a nice way to think of awareness. Not long ago, I was standing by a pond, and the surface was basically still. It wasn't windy, but it was raining—there was a light rain falling. And each little drop, you know, you just see how it impacted the still surface and caused these ripples. And then it would fade. But of course they were going all the time, all over.

And that to me was an analogy for sense impressions. So it's kind of like our awareness is this flat pond,

and sense impressions are being dropped in moment after moment after moment. Now, if we can stay in the flatness of the pond, we don't have to make a big swirl around any of the sense impressions. But if we forget, then we make a big fuss, and it gets the water very stirred up to the point where we lose that flat, even, peaceful nature of the surface.

Again, Upasika Ki: "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.

So this is the same encouragement. We stay with this inward staying knowing, and we look for anything that will disturb it. And we just don't allow the mind to go out and grab a hold outwardly—whether outwardly is sounds and sights, or whether outwardly is bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions. We don't let the mind travel very far from this peaceful knowing of its own nature.

This is from a French poet named Paul Valéry. It's interesting how artists have these very cool insights. He described his process this way: "I only refer to my pure self, by which I mean absolute consciousness, through which one turns loose from everything else." It's kind of the same experience. Turning to the knowing cuts the fixation with other things.

But we don't lose touch with the world. We stay connected to the heart and its movement, but that doesn't cut us off from people or risings or sounds or emotions or anything else. We know them, but we don't let ourselves get entangled with them.

And then the third way that I also mentioned in an earlier talk was seeing the empty nature of the mind. And in turning to the empty nature of the mind, it's sort of like you recognize that this mind is basically unfindable, and you let your attention go into this limitless, unfindability. And as you do that, it kind of takes the pressure off any attempt to hold that's close.

And this unfindability is important dharmically. There's a story in the Zen tradition about Bodhidharma, who was an Indian monk who took Buddhism to China for the first time. And in doing so established, it said, the Chan lineage in China. And it said that he meditated in a cave for nine years, a cave in the snows.

And at one point, a very devoted student came and wanted teachings from Bodhidharma. And his name was Hui Ko. And he waited outside the cave and he waited outside the cave, and it was snowing and very cold, and Bodhidharma wouldn't give him any instructions. So finally, to prove his sincerity, he cut off his arm and he tossed it in and said, "I'm really sincere." We might have some qualms about allowing that yogi on a retreat like this, but it seemed to work because Bodhidharma finally responded.

And he said, oh, Hui Ko, as he tossed the arm in, said, "Your disciple's mind is not pacified. I beg you, Master, pacify it."

And Bodhidharma said, "Show me your mind and I will pacify it."

And Hui Ko replied, "I have searched for the mind, but I have never been able to find it."

And Bodhidharma replied, "There, I have pacified your mind."

And at that moment, Hui Ko was enlightened and became the Dharma heir of Bodhidharma and the second great founder of Chan in China.

We find a pointing like this also from the Buddha. He was talking to his son. The Buddha had a son when he went away and left the household life. And when he came back later, enlightened, his son was seven years old. His son's name was Rahula, and he taught his son. And eventually Rahula became an Arhat at age seven.

So this was part of the Buddha's teaching to his son after he had returned. "Rahula, develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space."

It's as though as we let our attention go into this limitless and unfindable space, we become unhooked, unbound from the phenomena of the sense world. We don't lose touch with them—we're still there—but the heart finds itself in a free place and in a free relationship to them.

So start to tune into these moments of the day when you're relatively clear of greed, aversion, and delusion, and start to notice the freedom that's there. Sometimes these moments are very ordinary. They don't announce themselves with big banners—"Liberation, turn right." They just arise as quiet moments of ease.

They could be when you're walking. They could be in a sitting. They could be in the dining room at lunch. They could be when you're folding laundry or taking a shower. Notice when the heart is momentarily clear and appreciate the ability to rest there. Appreciate that freedom. That's where the path and the goal have come together. And you can just rest with that kind of awareness.

I'll close with a quotation again from the Suttanipāta, another one of the Brahmin youths who's asking questions of the Buddha—again, a very heartfelt question. This youth asks the Buddha: "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. The island is the refuge in the middle of the flood."

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

So let's just sit for a minute together: having nothing, clinging to nothing. That is the island. There is no other.

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