Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:55

As Steve described in his talk the other night on the Four Noble Truths, the journey of the Buddhist path goes from suffering to the end of suffering. There are many different words for this usual state of suffering that we find ourselves in, sometimes called bondage or clinging or grasping, or known by the term samsara, which points to the depth of habit that's involved in it. Similarly, there are many terms for the end of suffering. It can be called nibbana, freedom, release, liberation, enlightenment, awakening. All these terms describe the journey and the spectrum of the journey that we're on. We go from the state of bondage to the state of freedom.

In tonight's talk, I want to discuss this quality of freedom and how it relates to the path, how it's a part of the path itself. The subject of this talk is unentangled knowing.

For those who are not native English speakers, this term "unentangled" is an odd term. The word tangle refers to a twisted mass of usually yarn or string or hair that's gotten all mixed up, like when you've taken a ride in a convertible and then when you go to comb out your hair, it's all twisted together. Then we put the word "entangle" in front of it, and that's the verb—that's how things become knotted, twisted, and snarled up. The word "un" in front of "entangle" means we undo that tangle that has been formed.

This term "unentangled knowing" appears in a translation of a talk from a Thai laywoman teacher. Lay teachers in Thailand are a little bit rare to begin with. Lay women teachers are rarer still. This woman's name was Upasika Kee. Upasika means a lay woman supporter, and Kee was her name. She taught from the 1950s through the 1970s, and she has a wonderful book that's a collection of her talks called *Pure and Simple*. She was relentless in pointing practitioners back to the very central question of dharma practice, this question of bondage and freedom. All her talks hit this point again and again. Her book is highly recommended—she's a very strong teacher.

This is the sentence that this phrase comes from. She was pointing people to develop, quote, "an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." We'll come back to this quote and fill it in a little bit later. This is the gist of the talk.

This image of the tangle was used by the Buddha often. It appears frequently in the suttas in describing our usual condition. He commented at one point in the Anguttara Nikaya: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn"—craving creating the tangle of all our desires running in so many different directions that they get twisted up with one another and we get enmeshed in competing desires.

In the Samyutta Nikaya, there's this exchange where a questioner comes up and asks the Buddha a question. You should know in this exchange that Gautama is his family name, the Buddha's family name, and so some people called him Master Gautama or just Gautama. The questioner comes up and says: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle." Things haven't changed very much, have they? "So I ask of Gautama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

Well, this is our project, isn't it? We're all here to disentangle this tangled knot of craving and suffering that we find ourselves in, in the habituated patterns of mind. The Buddha's reply is that one who develops virtue, meditation, and wisdom disentangles this tangle. That's what we're doing here: sila, samadhi, and pañña.

What Upasika Kee was pointing to is a quality of mindfulness or awareness that knows objects without getting caught in grabbing after them and holding on to them, so that the mind stays balanced in relationship to a changing field of experience. This is a pointer to the same quality that Kamala talked about last night in her talk on equanimity—finding that balance that lets us know all the arisings and passings, but keeping steady, keeping a balanced mind in relation to them.

It's the same pointing tonight. I want to draw out or emphasize the freedom quality that's intrinsic in that place of equanimity and that is one of the reasons we practice for unentangled knowing. We're fully aware—that's the knowing piece—and we're not entangled, meaning that we're not getting hooked into latching on to these objects out of greed or aversion. We're seeing clearly. Greed is not happening through hanging on, aversion is not happening through pushing away, and we're fully aware, so delusion isn't happening either. Unentangled knowing is a state that's relatively free from these three afflictions of greed, aversion, and delusion.

These moments happen for us. You could call them moments of equanimity or moments of unentangledness throughout the day, but they may be subtle and pass quickly. If we're not trying to tune into them, we miss them. This talk is also an encouragement not to do anything different in your practice, but to begin to notice when the mind is in this place of balance and non-reactivity. In that place, begin to feel for yourself the kind of freedom that you can feel in a moment here and now.

As part of the talk, I want to review a few approaches to meditation that head directly in this general direction. All of our practice heads toward this greater equanimity and freedom. There are three practices I'm going to talk about in the second half specifically oriented to bringing out this quality of unentangled knowing.

But before we venture into the realm of freedom, we must understand more clearly how we become bound, how we become caught. Let me describe in some detail how bondage unfolds on a moment-to-moment basis.

The Buddha's fundamental outline of bondage and freedom is the Four Noble Truths, as Steve described

the other night. But in another teaching, he describes this process in greater detail through a moment-to-moment unfolding—what is usually called the chain of dependent origination. He traces twelve links that occur in a sequence where one gives rise to the next, leading us repeatedly to the place of suffering.

These twelve links are quite complex and could occupy an entire talk in themselves, but I'm going to focus on the central four, setting aside the first five and the last three. While those outer links become more philosophical and complicated, understanding these central four will give you the heart of how to practice with dependent origination as we can feel it moment by moment.

First, we must open to our basic situation as human beings. I want to suggest that all human beings—young and old, male and female, enlightened and unenlightened, of all genders and races—share the same fundamental experience: in any moment, six things can be happening.

The Buddha pointed to this in a sutta called the Sutta on Totality. With a group of monks gathered around him, he declared: "Listen monks, attend carefully and I will teach you the totality of life." That's quite brave, isn't it? Freud didn't say that. Marx didn't say that. Einstein didn't say that. Here was the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, announcing: "I'll teach you the totality of life."

He said: "It is just 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 described a totality different than this would not be knowing what they were talking about."

When you think about it, this is our whole human experience, isn't it? This is what's happening for us in any moment, in every moment. There are sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and mind objects—mind objects being primarily thoughts and emotions. We can receive these data because of what Buddhism calls the six senses: the five physical senses and the sense door of the mind. This is what makes this set of arisings possible.

In any moment, it's really quite simple—there are only ever six things happening at most. Sometimes none of those are happening. This makes meditation practice easy, doesn't it? You just have to be aware of these six things. Really simple.

Here's where we enter the chain of dependent origination. The first five links pass by, and the sixth link is called contact. Contact is the coming together of the sense organ—like the eye—the sense object—like the sight before you in the visual field—and the consciousness related to that sense organ.

If you're asleep, under anesthesia, or passed out, that consciousness is not so active. In those situations, you're not experiencing sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch in any obvious way. But when you're awake with your eyes open, you experience seeing. When you're awake with functioning ears, you experience hearing.

The coming together of consciousness, sense organ, and object is called contact—that's simply the Buddha's vocabulary. Contact basically means these data of the senses. When a sound arises, that's an item of sense contact for you—sound contact, or hearing contact.

Our basic situation is that contact is happening through these six senses constantly while we're awake. Can you stop this from happening? Can you simply say, "Ears don't hear, nose don't smell, mind don't feel"? Can you do that? No. These phenomena happen whether we want them to or not. Our situation as human beings is that we're constantly being contacted by different phenomena through the six sense doors.

This wouldn't be problematic if everything were pleasant all the time.

But they're not. They alternate. Sometimes pleasant, sometimes painful. So we're sitting here, we're sensitive beings, and these things are impacting us all the time. How do we respond?

This brings us to the next link in the chain of dependent origination, called feeling tone. The Pali word is *vedana*. Feeling tone means that every one of these moments of contact might be pleasant, or it might be painful, or it might be neither—what we'll call neutral. Pleasant, painful, or neutral.

This is important because it conditions the reactive formations. When something is pleasant, if we're not paying attention, what do we do in relation to it? We hang on to it, don't we? We want it to last, so we take hold of it and try to make it last. If something is painful, what do we do? We want to push it away. Notice that in order to push something away, you first have to take hold of it. You have to grab it and then push it. So if we want to hold on to it, we grab it and bring it closer. If we want to push it away, we grab it and then push. But in either case, the grabbing happens in order to do that.

If it's neutral, notice what your relation to neutral experience often is—it's boring. It doesn't grab us one way or another, so we just space out. We don't really pay attention to the neutral, just like neutral people in our lives. As the metta meditation reveals, we can just ignore them. They don't inflame our passion.

Delusion accompanies neutrality. Greed accompanies the pleasant. And aversion accompanies the unpleasant. These are manifestations of what's called craving. The second noble truth that Steve talked about, *tanha*, is the reactive mind—this quality of thirst that wants things to be different than they are.

Even though craving sounds like a desire force, it encompasses both the wanting to pull the good close and wanting to push the difficult away, because desire basically wants to keep things always pleasant. So it likes the pleasant and doesn't like the unpleasant. Craving encompasses both greed and aversion.

Because we don't notice we're doing it, there's usually delusion involved also. Most people in the world, when they push and pull, don't know that they're pushing and pulling. They don't know greed and aversion are operating, so they're not seeing clearly the reaction of their mind. Delusion is also present. Craving generally rests on greed, aversion, and delusion, and you can think of it as synonymous with

these three.

Craving is provoked by the feeling tone, and then it leads into this grabbing hold of, which is called clinging. So altogether, the sequence goes: contact has a feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. That feeling tone tends to condition a reaction of greed, aversion, and delusion, and that leads us to grab hold of the object. Once we've grabbed hold of something, the chain goes on to suffering. Basically, suffering—either gross or subtle—is unavoidable once the grasping has happened.

Let me give you some examples to make this more real. Let's say you're a yogi on the eight precepts, which a number of you are. Lovely to see you undertaking the practice of renunciation. You go into the dining hall at tea time to get your modest glass of juice, and you see this little sign: "Ice cream on back table." And you think, "Why did I take the eight precepts now? Ice cream is my favorite food, and I can't have it? Well, maybe I'll take some and put it in the yogi fridge overnight." But it's ice cream—it's going to melt if you put it in the refrigerated compartment. And you can't be an eight-precept person being seen hoarding ice cream. That wouldn't look good on the yogi resume.

So then, you know, you could get into a whole story about this. Maybe I should go off eight precepts just for tonight. I'll have a little bit of protein first and then I'll be ready and I'll go over and have the ice cream after. And I could just go back on eight precepts tomorrow night. But I wouldn't feel totally committed. I made this pledge. I'm just going to do it. I said I would just do it, but I'm really hungry tonight. I didn't really take enough lunch, and now I'm feeling hungry, and I love ice cream. Why did they have to put it out tonight? Why couldn't they have waited until the last lunch? And what am I going to do about this?

And so you could get caught up in this spinning for a while, and you could kind of feel disappointed for like the next hour about being hungry and not being able to have the ice cream. And then at some point, you know, this whole issue would just fade away and it'd be over and gone.

So in a way, by taking hold of the ice cream thing, you've kind of taken birth. You've become a new person, a new you. And this is the you who is the hungry yogi on eight precepts. And as long as you keep thinking about and missing the ice cream, you can sustain that you for like an hour through the having taken a hold. And this is an incarnation that has a little bit of dukkha in it because it's founded on missing and lacking and wanting.

So we say here that we've taken birth, that by grabbing hold of that and thinking about it—my habits, my desire, my like, my favorite food, my hunger—we create a new I in this time frame that is like a little birth. It's like we've given birth to a new person who is, let's call it, the hungry yogi. So the hungry yogi exists for like an hour. That lifespan is full of wanting and incompleteness and frustration. And at the end of the hour, the hungry yogi passes away. And then you're just back in walking meditation, appreciating the hills and the sunset light and all of that. It's fine again. But that birth, which is born from grasping, was not a happy one.

Okay? So there are also happy births. You come into a sitting, you sit down, really present. Oh, I feel great in my body. My attention stays where I put it. The mind isn't wandering. I'm starting to feel steady and stable. My body feels relaxed. My mind is still. This is the meditation I've always knew I could have.

So by becoming, let's say, aware of that and then grasping it, then we become someone—I'm a good yogi in a concentrated state. And now I'm a good meditator and I love it. I've struggled up to now, but now I love meditation. So we go out for a walking period. We go through our walking. We're pretty present and we sort of can't wait. I can't wait to get back and be in that concentrated state again. I just know it's going to be there for me.

So we go back in and we're really looking forward. I'm going to have that excellent sitting, my very best sitting all over again. It was so blissful and peaceful. And we sit down and it's all gone. The body's kind of cranky and the mind is all over the place. A lot of thoughts, a lot of energy, a lot of restlessness. We can hardly find the breath, much less stay with it. And then we're hugely aversive. How can this happen? I'm a concentrated yogi. How can this go away now? I'm really frustrated. I'll try really hard to get it back.

And so we get really close to the breath and think, "I'm not going to let one go by." And then we just get tighter and tighter and our concentration leaks away. In this case, by claiming the good concentration and the result, the fruit of the meditation, we've identified with it and given birth to the good yogi or the concentrated yogi. We think that will extend into the future. So we have this new identity. We take it out for a walk. We come back and it goes away. And then that going away is painful. The concentrated yogi dies at that point, and it's a painful death.

So either we grab hold of something painful and then we have an unhappy life but a pleasant death, or we grab hold of something wonderful and we have a happy life but a painful death. Either way, there's suffering that comes out of our having clung and formed this new identity.

In either case, eventually we come back to balance. We do return to this state of balance where we've let go of the holding. We've released it. And then we're again open to everything that's coming and going, more or less. This is the place in meditation we become more and more familiar with.

If we review our whole life, it's been like this all along. We've been aware and things have been coming and going. Things have come like mother, breast, food, father, school, middle school, romance, crushes, rejection, high school, college, career, taxes, Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, MTV—the whole thing unfolds from there. All these experiences coming through our consciousness, through contact. Some of them we really like and want to hold on to, and some of them are really scary and threatening, and we want to push them away or pull back. So finding this place of balance in relation to all these changing appearances is not so simple. But if we take hold, we end up suffering.

We start to see that when we hold on to something, we take birth as a new I, a new self. We get this understanding about grasping or clinging or holding on that Andrew Olendzki describes in one of his

essays. Andrew Olendzki is the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, a study center right next to IMS in Massachusetts, and he's a Pali scholar. He says, "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."

This is a very perceptive comment. It's not that the I does the grasping. Grasping happens through an action of mind, but when it happens, the I comes into being. The I is formed out of our taking hold of something. This is the way the self gets created moment after moment.

Mostly for people untrained in meditation, life consists of what is called monkey mind. If you've ever seen a monkey swing through the forest, it'll hold on to one vine, but it'll only let go of the one vine when it sees another vine that it can hold on to. It lets go of one in order to hold on to the next. And then it'll let go of that one in order to hold on to the next. So the monkey is always holding on or about to hold on. And that's how it makes its way through the forest.

So mostly in our life, we go from holding on to one thing and taking birth and passing away and then holding on to the next immediately. In spiritual life, we start to see this. We start to see the grasping and we can feel the pain of it. It's not always easy to let go. Ajahn Chah said seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing you're clinging and not being able to let go. This seems fairly accurate in my experience. But we learn a lot from watching this unfold moment by moment, and maybe there's another choice. Maybe there's another way to respond.

If the chain of dependent origination just takes us over this same ground—contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and on to suffering—that's just bondage again and again and again. But there has to be a way out. There has to be freedom somewhere or the Buddha wouldn't have taught that we could become free. So where is the freedom? Is there any freedom now or is freedom only going to be something that's at the very end of the journey when we attain Arahantship or full liberation twenty lifetimes from now? Is there some freedom available here and now? Which is another way of saying, can this chain be broken from contact, feeling, craving, clinging?

Referring back to Kamala's talk on equanimity last night, do you ever have the experience of being with a pleasant experience and not have craving arise?

Does that happen? Yes. Do you ever have the experience of being with unpleasant experience, painful experience, and not have aversion arise? Yes.

This is possible. And this is what equanimity is all about. Through strengthening the mind and paying close attention, we can start to relate to pleasure and pain without falling into craving. This is the big insight of dependent origination. We can find freedom in relation to our experience on a moment-to-moment basis, and the freedom is based on feeling the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral

without sliding into craving.

Classically, this is where the chain of dependent origination gets broken. And when it's broken here, it doesn't have to lead to suffering. It doesn't lead to suffering. If we don't move from feeling to craving, the link does not progress to suffering. This means we're experiencing pleasant and unpleasant contact, but the mind doesn't go into greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is an area we want to investigate in our practice. At what moments is the mind free of greed, aversion, and delusion? We'll come back to this a little later and pinpoint it more precisely. But when we're there, we could say we're resting in a space or a gap or an openness between feeling and craving.

One Buddhist teacher said, "The whole of the path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving." This is all we have to do: notice clearly contact and the feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—and hold the mind in balance so we don't slide into craving. That short circuits the trip to suffering. It simply doesn't happen.

Begin to explore this in your meditation practice. What does that feel like? When feeling is present, but you don't slide into greed, aversion or delusion, what's the feeling there? Generally, I would say the feeling is of spaciousness and equanimity. And in that kind of equanimity, there's freedom.

In that moment, by not being embroiled in reactivity, we have a space that feels free. It feels open, can feel light, can feel peaceful, can feel wide. From that space, loving kindness and compassion and joy come more easily. This is a place, at least relatively, of freedom.

That kind of gap, that resting, is not being determined by the conditions at the six sense doors. Pleasure and pain are coming, but we're not falling sway to their conditioning. We're resting in a place not determined by them. In this, we're moving a little bit out of the conditioned realm and into the unconditioned realm.

This is from Ajahn Chah, Jack Kornfield's first teacher. It's a little long, but please be patient. It's a beautiful piece:

"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? 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."

When we rest in this gap, we're not taking birth. We're not taking on a new self, a new incarnation. And because we're not taking on a new incarnation, we're not subject to death at that point. Another word used for this coming into birth is "becoming."

Many people came to talk to the Buddha during his life and asked him countless questions. There's one particularly sweet passage in the Sutta Nipata where these Brahmin youths have all gotten together and come to visit the Buddha. Brahmins at the time were in a school not particularly appreciative of the Buddhist teachings or lineage. It was the established ecclesiastical order of the Buddha's time, connected with what later became Hinduism. So there's something very sweet about these Brahmin youths coming to seek counsel from a teacher outside their own lineage.

So one youth whose name is Todaya asks the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to have asked the Buddha this? Wow, what's it like where you sit?

So the Buddha replied, "That sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." No desire, having nothing—that is, owning nothing—unentangled in becoming. So that means not generating this new self through clinging over and over again.

Ajahn Chah had another pointer. You can imagine him teaching in Thailand in an outdoor hall. The temperature is very mild there even in the evenings, so most of the talks are given in halls outdoors. There's a floor and pillars going up on the sides that support the roof, but there are no walls. It's just open air.

You can imagine Ajahn Chah in one of these settings. He points and says, "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." So you can imagine—you can stand on the floor. There's existence here. You can stand on the roof. But in the space between and the empty spaces going out, there's nowhere to stand. So that's emptiness.

To put it bluntly, he continues, "We say that nibbana is this emptiness."

So what he's saying is that when we rest in that gap and don't go into the formation of self, we are resting in a kind of peace that is related to the goal of the whole path—this supreme peace that is the goal of the whole path. The reason it's related is because this moment of peace is not so constructed. It's not something that we've put together through effort, but rather by non-activity, by non-clinging, that this kind of peace is disclosed in the mind.

So we're touching on something that Ajahn Chah said was somewhat fundamental. He said this is something that's unborn and uncreated and partakes, therefore, of not dying—partakes of the deathless. No self being born, no self dying. It's always available. It's always present. That has to be one of the

qualities of something that's not subject to conditions, to coming and going—always available, this peace.

This is from Ajahn Jhumni, another Thai forest teacher: "Phenomena show their dharma of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

In the Thai forest tradition, this is a frequent pointing—that as we rest in this place that's free of greed, aversion, and delusion, we are touching a little bit or having a little taste of this unconditioned peace that is the goal of the whole path. We can start to feel in this when greed, aversion and delusion are absent or relatively absent—we can start to feel the freedom of that because the freedom we're tasting is a little taste of the freedom that's at the end of the path.

But this freedom is also the way to walk the path. As we rest with awareness, the path continues to unfold ever deeper and deeper in our practice. In a way, you could say that the freedom is the goal. Even this taste here and now is the goal, but it's also the path, because it keeps deepening in that direction. So it's a way of understanding that the path and the goal have come together for us. When you start to feel that, you can feel a lot of trust, a lot of confidence, because all you have to do is refrain from clinging, pay attention and don't cling. Simple. Simple but not easy.

One of my teachers in Thailand rested here a lot. This was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who there's also a photo of in the gratitude hut. There's a photo of Ajahn Chah as well. Ajahn Buddhadasa was one of the most inspiring monks and teachers in Thailand in the last half of the last century. He was an iconoclastic monk because he was not afraid to speak out on social issues. He would speak out against the government and even high officers if he felt they were not treating the people well. For some time he was frowned upon by some of the authorities, but he continued to speak his mind.

I went to practice with him at his monastery in southern Thailand. He was remarkably available, living in the forest his whole adult life in great simplicity. Every morning he would sit on a bench near his small cottage, surrounded by forest roosters that pecked the ground at his feet and large temple dogs that seemed to have an uncanny ability to detect Westerners, nipping at our heels while leaving the Thai monks completely alone. So approaching Ajahn Buddhadasa was always something of an adventure.

You could simply walk up to him as he sat on his bench. As a monk, I would offer my three bows before him, and then I was free to ask whatever I wished—I could discuss Dhamma with him. He was utterly available. Yet I found myself deeply unnerved and somewhat intimidated by his presence, for he possessed this profound equanimity where everything arose and passed without his reacting to it. He was simply meditating all the objects of his experience, and that included meditating me.

I would sit down, and he wouldn't really acknowledge my existence. If you visit a typical pastor or teacher, they welcome you warmly—offering you a chair, asking if you need tissues, expressing delight at seeing you. This was decidedly not Ajahn Buddhadasa's style. I would make my bows, and he would meditate me, resting in this place of great equanimity. I took this as rejection, thinking he didn't want me

there. Only later did I realize that he was completely equanimous about my arising and passing—he simply didn't care whether I came to talk with him or got up and walked away. I was just another phenomenon in his field of experience, and he had truly settled there. I never witnessed anything disturb that fundamental equanimity.

Ajahn Buddhadasa spoke extensively about the lack of satisfaction in conditioned things. This becomes part of our experience as we begin to find this balance. We observe the changing experiences in the conditioned realm and recognize that they are all subject to coming and going—none can provide lasting satisfaction. We start to discover that this place where we can rest, free of greed, aversion, and delusion, is actually more satisfying than sense experiences. We begin to develop an attraction to this place, this resting in the gap, this refuge of freedom and equanimity. This is truly where we want to be, and we naturally start to lose interest in the objects themselves.

Something that can support this shift—and it happens quite naturally for many people, though not for everyone, so it's not necessary to force this transition—is moving our attention away from focusing on objects toward focusing on the quality of awareness itself. We become disenchanted with the objects that arise because they lack permanence, don't endure, and cannot deeply satisfy. But we grow fascinated by this quality of knowing—you could call it awareness or consciousness—that remains constantly present, holding these objects, receiving them, knowing them.

Ajahn Buddhadasa called this quality *satipanya*—an interesting conjunction not commonly found in Buddhist teachings, but present in the Thai forest lineage. The word *sati*, meaning mindfulness, combined with *panya*, meaning wisdom, suggests this quality of awareness that observes our experience with a blend, a union of mindfulness and wisdom. This is where we want to settle in our meditation practice. This is what we seek to discover—this combination of *satipanya*.

One way to cultivate this is by turning our attention from the objects toward the knowing itself. If you prefer to stay with the objects themselves, that's perfectly fine—the *satipanya* will grow there as well. Don't worry about changing anything you've been doing. But some people find this alternative approach helpful: turning the attention to awareness itself, moving away from looking outward toward looking back, examining what is looking. The language that points in this direction includes turning the attention back, turning the mind back on itself, turning awareness back on itself, becoming aware of awareness, looking back at awareness.

To get a taste of this, you might let your eyes roam around the room right now. If you wish, even indulge a little—let your gaze linger on things you find beautiful, people you enjoy, images of the Buddha and Prajnaparamita, the flowers, and allow yourself to delight in them.

Just let your eyes roam among the trees outside, the hills. See if in doing that, there is a little bit of energetic pull toward those beautiful objects—as though something is being drawn out through the eyes toward them.

Now take that outward-going energy and turn it back to what is looking. Take that awareness and direct it back on itself. Does it feel any different when you do that? What feels different? How does it feel? What shifts? More spacious? More peaceful? Not relating to the things? Not grasping?

I heard someone say, "I can't do it." That's perfectly fine. I'm just making suggestions to play with, and we'll make other suggestions you can explore too. Sometimes this will connect for people, sometimes it won't. Don't worry if it doesn't—it's just an alternative approach.

Some people report that instead of being drawn outward, which can lead to grasping, this approach settles us back a little more. It brings spaciousness, an element of peace, and non-attachment into the moment's experience. As you drew the awareness back, did you lose track of visual objects? You're still seeing, aren't you? You can still relate to the world, but you're in a more settled-back place, which has an aspect of non-grasping—which is freedom—and spaciousness, which is equanimity.

For some people, this meditation approach can lead rather directly into this place of unentangled knowing. We take the emphasis off the outer objects and place it back on awareness itself, and that movement can cut some of the entanglement, some of the tendency to focus and grasp at objects. This is a very interesting thing to explore, and what we end up exploring is the quality of awareness itself.

This is referred to in the Buddhist teachings as the fifth aggregate called consciousness. The Buddha described human experience through the aggregates, and one of them is consciousness—the knowing of a sound, a sight, a taste, a touch, a smell, a thought, an emotion. The knowing of that. Every time we're awake, we're knowing something.

When we hear a sound like this bell, we can look at two aspects of it. There's the sound itself—a fairly nice sound, pleasant, especially because it means the end of the sitting. It's a really nice sound for meditators, with pleasant overtones. But then we can also notice our knowing of it. You're aware of it, right? When you hear the sound of the bell, you're aware of it. So there's something in you that is conscious of it, that is knowing it. Those are all synonyms.

We can tune in directly to that knowing quality, which is present with every bit of sense experience. It's not that there are two separate things—the knowing and the bell. The way I understand it, they both arise together. When you hear this, there's just one experience.

That's just one thing. But in Buddhism, we like to look at human experience. So there's one thing, but we can know two aspects of this—the sound and the knowing of it. That may seem odd, that there are two aspects of one experience, but it happens all the time. Like I'm going to hold up this bell. Is it round or is it gold? It's just one thing, but it's both round and gold, right? So it's one thing that has two aspects we can tease out.

When I strike the bell, one experience arises. There's the sound and there's your knowing of it. What we're doing is placing our attention on consciousness itself, feeling that knowing taking place in us. When we do

that, we take a step back from the world of objects.

Normally, especially in Western culture, we think the world is made up of objects. We just take that for granted. Oh, the world is made up of earth and roads and buildings and women and zafus and men and walls and lamps and ceilings, trees and flowers. We think that's what the world's made up of.

But in Buddhism, the world we want to look at is the world of human experience. That's where suffering happens. That's where freedom happens. That world is made up of consciousness knowing land and roads and buildings and floors and women and men and ceilings and lamps and so on. Everything that arises is known in human consciousness. When we start to see it that way, that gives us another refuge—one that's not immersed in, not stuck in the world of objects. It gives us another place to go.

Finding this quality of consciousness is not so easy. Ajahn Sumedho has this nice description. He said, it's just like the question, "Can you see your own eyes?" Not so easy, is it? Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes, but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here. I've got two eyes and I can't see them. But you can see my eyes. But there's no need for me to see my eyes because I can see. It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying, "Why can't I see my own eyes?" you'd think, "Ajahn Sumedho is really weird, isn't he?"

Looking in a mirror, you can see a reflection, but that's not your eyes. It's a reflection of your eyes. There's no way that I've been able to look and see my own eyes, but then it's not necessary to see your own eyes. It's not necessary to know what it is that knows because there's knowing.

Ajahn Chah put it similarly. He said, "Don't worry about not being able to grasp this awareness or find this awareness. You're riding on a horse and you're asking, 'Where's the horse?'" It's working for you. So just notice your awareness to the extent that you can notice it. This is one way, one meditation approach to step back from enmeshment with objects.

I want to mention one other briefly. In the last several years, some of us—I think all four of us teachers—have been relating to a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who I think Steve originally met in Burma and has since brought over to the West. Sally and I had a chance to practice with him at IMS when Steve brought him over a few years ago, and Kamala has spent time with him also. We've really appreciated his teaching.

Steve mentioned something the other day—or maybe Kamala said it—about not being so concerned about the objects of mindfulness practice, but more concerned with the quality of your awareness. This is a pointer from U Tejaniya, who says, "Follow your usual meditation technique. You can be aware of sounds or breath or body, emotions or thoughts, but always notice how are you relating to them." He had three simple questions to check your relationship, and he said, "Check this often."

Are you relating to them with greed? You'll know this if you want something else to be happening. So you're experiencing a moment, but you look and you see you want something else to be happening—then there's greed in the mind. Or are you wanting something to stop happening? The pain in the knee, the

ache in the back, the mood of restlessness. Then there's aversion at play. Or are you not in touch with what's happening? Are you spacing out? Then there's delusion. So he says, check: What's the attitude of the mind to your experience? Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion? And you can feel into these just in the moment.

So the way I began to practice with these, I was using many of the same objects that we've talked about here—breath, body, sounds, thoughts, emotions. And then regularly I would start to check: is there greed, aversion, or delusion? If there is, you don't judge that; you just become aware of the greed, the aversion, or the delusion. As I got more familiar with it, I could check more often. So I started checking maybe five times every sitting. I'd ask these three questions. If there was greed or aversion or delusion, I'd know it. Then as I got more familiar, I would check like ten times a sitting. And as it got more familiar, I would never stop checking. My main meditation was checking my mind to see if it was tilting into greed, aversion, and delusion. So in that way, the meditation becomes: am I falling into craving, greed, aversion, delusion, or am I free of it? And that's all in a way that one needs to do.

This again is from Upasika Kee: "So 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. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on."

When you practice in this way, you release the fixation on the passing objects and you put the attention where it's really most important, and that is: what's my heart doing? Am I falling into greed, aversion, or delusion? So in a way, it's the same movement back from the world of objects and into the world of our own awareness.

And Upasika Kee puts it in this way: "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 we keep our attention directed inwardly at the very state of our own heart, looking for its reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion. And if they don't come, then we simply rest in that unentangled knowing which has the quality of freedom, contentment, spaciousness, equanimity, and vitality—because it's a very awake place. We're in touch with everything that's happening, but we're not caught.

So this inward turning doesn't mean we cut off from the world. As you saw with placing awareness on awareness, we still see, we still hear, we can speak and relate and so forth. But it means part of our attention, the most important part, stays with the movements of our own heart and mind. That's our first priority.

This is freedom here and now. This is also the path. Practicing in this way opens us up to more and more freedom as the path unfolds. So it is full and rich and contented here and now, and it's also onward leading, develops all the factors of the path.

So I'll just close with this quotation again from the Sutta Nipata, when the Brahmin youths were coming up to question the Buddha. This was a later Brahmin youth named Kappa. He said to 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 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."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island.

That is nibbana, the total ending of aging and death.

So thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking and the last sitting.

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