Patterns of Becoming 3: Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:05

So this will be the third talk in this series called Patterns of Becoming. The title of this evening's talk is Unentangled Knowing.

We've been exploring for a few evenings how the construction of self happens again and again and how that puts us into a vulnerability to suffering. We've looked at it through the perspective of perception leading to proliferation, as was described in the Honeyball Sutta. We've looked at it through the view of the five aggregates and how clinging to any of the five aggregates exposes us to personality view.

Tonight we're going to look at it through the map of dependent origination, which is the most detailed description that the Buddha gave of how suffering gets created again and again and again.

In all these talks, we've been exploring primarily the process of the creation of self, which is some kind of bondage, some kind of grasping that leads to suffering. But tonight, I want to put a little more emphasis on something I touched on the first night but didn't go into deeply, which is the factor of release—how we get released from these cycles and how we find freedom in relationship to all our experience.

I think it's a very deep question for all of us as practitioners how we understand freedom. There is obviously a great freedom that comes at the end of the path. The path does have an end. As it's said, it's good in the beginning, it's good in the middle, and it's good in the end, and it does have an end. That end is when the mind is completely free of the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is what full awakening is about.

That might be a long time from now. It might not happen this retreat. For those of us who are on the slow path—and I definitely include myself—it might not happen this retreat. So do we have to wait until that happens to have a real taste of freedom in our life in a very practical and felt way? Or is some measure of freedom available earlier? Is it available now to us? And what would that look like? What would that feel like? And how does that come about?

That's the topic I want to explore more this evening. I'm going to do it through this concept called unentangled knowing. This was a term that was used by a laywoman teacher in Thailand named Upasika Kee. She describes it in a wonderful book called *Pure and Simple*, which I highly recommend.

First of all, it's unusual to find women teachers in Thailand because the Dharma world there is very dominated by monks. Secondly, she was a laywoman. She wasn't even a nun, so she called herself Upasika, which just means a laywoman supporter of the Dhamma. So she's known as Upasika Kee. She taught from the 1950s into the 1970s and died sometime in the 1970s. *Pure and Simple* is a recording of a

collection of her talks with a great translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. It's highly recommended—one of the most inspiring books of teachings I know of from a woman in our tradition. She was a very powerful and clear teacher.

So this is her term, unentangled knowing. If you're not a native English speaker, this is an odd word. Unentangled doesn't come up very often. So just a word on the derivation. Tangle, of course, is a twisting or knotting of different strands or threads. They get all jumbled up together and it's hard to pull them apart—like your hair if you ride in a convertible, or a kitten playing with a ball of yarn that quickly gets tangled.

Entangled is the verb about how that comes about. And "un" means the undoing of the entanglement. So it is about how we get disentangled from the tangle that we are in.

The Buddha used the word tangle often to describe our situation. It's a nice metaphor because it points to the way that different desires sort of conflict with each other. When we try to follow them all, they weave a knot, and we don't know how to release it because desires pull us in all these different directions.

Upasika Kee had this very nice pointing: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." That will be the theme we'll explore—what this inward staying, unentangled knowing is about and how it releases this tangle, which the Buddha described in a number of passages. Here's one: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn."

And you can see this tangle manifested vividly in our political landscape, in the grasping for power and money that unfolds in every country across the earth—a world truly enveloped by craving.

There's another beautiful quotation that opens the Visuddhimagga, though it originates from the suttas themselves. A questioner approaches the Buddha and asks: "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?"

The answer forms the foundation of what the Visuddhimagga attempts to explain. It's essentially one who develops ethics, meditation, and wisdom. This is precisely what we're engaged in here—disentangling this tangle of conflicting forces within the heart that inevitably lead to suffering.

So this "unentangled" points directly to the tangle itself—the way we become caught up with the objects of our experience. But the phrase "unentangled knowing" points to something remarkable: the possibility of a relationship with our experience that remains free, uncaught.

We want to explore both dimensions this evening. I'd like to suggest that this unentangled knowing is actually arising for all of us in many moments throughout each day during a retreat like this, but we may not be noticing when it's happening. We might be missing an appreciation of this very state of mind.

James spoke extensively last night about recognizing and appreciating the wholesome states of mind that

arise naturally. This unentangled knowing represents another central wholesome state that we can learn to feel in our daily experience, feel in our formal meditation, and begin to appreciate. As we start to know it and value it, returning to this state becomes much more accessible—as James also emphasized last night.

So we'll explore this opening, this way of relating to experience, and discuss several different meditation approaches that make it accessible, that point directly toward this understanding.

Just one word of caution: much of the vocabulary I'll use tonight comes from one particular tradition within Theravada—the Thai Forest tradition. Those familiar with the teachings of Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Man, Ajahn Mahabua, or Ajahn Sumedho will feel a natural affinity with this description. Those more oriented toward classical Burmese or Sri Lankan approaches might find it somewhat unorthodox.

We have both these lineages represented at Spirit Rock—the lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw from Burma and Ajahn Chah from Thailand. I actually believe this blending constitutes one of our center's greatest strengths. From the Burmese tradition, we inherit excellent tools for developing precision in mindfulness. From the Thai Forest tradition, we receive a quality of openness and emphasis on heart qualities. I think we achieve a beautiful integration here.

Much of tonight's teaching will flow from the Thai Forest perspective, of which Upasaka Ki was a representative.

Now, we want to explore through the framework of dependent origination first how we become caught—how the tangle forms—and then how it can be released.

The chain of dependent origination stands as one of the Buddha's central teachings, perhaps his most profound insight. In it, he described a sequence of twelve causal conditions that begin with ignorance, unfold through a series of sequential developments, and culminate in suffering. The understanding is that upon reaching suffering, we begin the cycle anew, reinforcing ignorance and circling the wheel again to arrive once more at suffering.

So dependent origination offers a moment-by-moment analysis of how we create and recreate the experience of suffering. In its progression from ignorance to suffering, it reveals the cycle of bondage. But the Buddha always taught how this cycle can be undone, and we'll examine that closely as well.

There are twelve links altogether. I won't address most of them tonight—that would constitute another entire talk, very interesting but not our focus this evening. I'm going to bypass the first five links, which become somewhat philosophical, and also set aside the last three links, which are similarly philosophical. Instead, we'll concentrate on the central four links that directly relate to our meditation experience.

To introduce this, I want to share one of the Buddha's teachings called the Sutta on Totality, one of the discourses in the Sutta Pitaka. We've discussed many times that as human beings, we constantly

experience phenomena through the six sense doors—this forms one of the Buddha's primary descriptions of our condition.

In this particular discourse, he addressed this directly: "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life?" This is one translation. "What is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That certainly captures our attention, doesn't it? Who else has made such a declaration—"Listen, I'm going to tell you the totality of life"? Marx didn't make such a claim. Freud didn't do that. Einstein didn't do that. Yet here's the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, saying: "I'm going to describe the totality of life."

So what is it?

Anyone who would try to describe a totality beyond this would not know of what they were speaking. So this is kind of remarkable, isn't it? Whatever human life is about, there are only ever six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—which is basically thoughts and emotions. This gives a beautiful simplicity that maps to our meditation practice and provides us with what I feel is a very sound perspective on what we need to do.

All we need to do is learn how to relate skillfully to these six types of phenomena. Easy, right? That's all we need to do. Simple perhaps, but not always so easy.

These six types of phenomena are constantly arising. They're known by the different six sense consciousnesses, and the coming together of the sense object, the sense organ, and the sense consciousness is what is called contact. We talked about this with the honey ball discourse. As beings, our world consists of constantly experiencing contact at the six sense doors from the impingement of sense objects known through the sense organs.

And why is this problematic? Because these contacts aren't always pleasant. We keep getting bombarded by this ever-changing mix of pleasant and unpleasant experiences that we ultimately have no control over. That's why the life of sentient beings is so uncertain and insecure and unpredictable. That's what we're exposed to—we're sensitive, and we keep getting exposed to that bombardment.

This is the first of the links of dependent origination that we'll focus on tonight: contact. It simply describes how we keep getting bombarded by sense impressions at the six sense doors.

We've talked before about what the next step in the chain is. When there's contact, some of it's pleasant, some of it's painful, some of it's neither pleasant nor painful—neutral. This is the quality called feeling tone, vedanā, or sometimes simply abbreviated as feeling. It's on the basis of vedanā that we experience this mix of pleasure and pain and that we then react. I think we've explored this quite extensively.

So in the chain of dependent origination, contact leads to feeling. Now, if we're not being mindful, based on feeling tone, we're likely to slide into a reactive formation of mind. With the pleasant, what's the reactive formation? It's greed, isn't it? Desire, wanting. With the painful, the reactive formation is

aversion. And with the neutral, delusion—we lose touch, we space out, we don't pay attention.

The feeling tone is what gives rise to these reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion, which are the kilesas—the fundamental forces that cause suffering in ourselves and in the world. Taken together, the Buddha gave a name to these three kilesas: craving, or taṇhā.

Even though craving is a word that points to the desire aspect, craving actually encompasses all of these. Of course, there's the desire force for the pleasant. Aversion is also an expression of a different kind of desire—it's a desire not to experience the painful. So both greed and aversion are movements of craving. Delusion is there to cover over the activity of greed and aversion, because if we saw it clearly, we couldn't do it.

Part of the great discovery of a retreat like this is that you start shining the light of mindfulness on these activities of greed and aversion, and you dispel the delusion. When we start to see the constant movement cycling through wanting and not wanting, liking and not liking, we start to get tired of it. We start to get fed up with the way it keeps the mind in turmoil. And that force of clear seeing, of wisdom and discernment, starts to slow down the momentum of the greed and aversion—it slows down the momentum of craving.

But if mindfulness isn't there, these forces will just carry on as they've been doing, the Buddha said, since beginningless time.

Let's examine this a little more closely. A contact happens—let's say it's pleasant. A pleasant feeling tone arises, the force of liking or wanting comes in, and then, if you look closely, the mind starts inclining toward that object. It could be a sense of relaxation in the body. It could be a pleasant taste at a meal. It could be a beautiful mind state of loving-kindness or compassion.

As soon as there's that inclining of the mind toward the object, out of desire for it, the next thing that happens is we take hold of it. There is some grasping there—some clinging, taking hold of that pleasant object. And then we might start to make a story about it.

Now that we've taken a hold of it, we have something to build up a story around. But first we have to take a hold of it. If it just passed through our experience, no story would arise. This is the part of the honey ball where perception leads to proliferation. So this grasping is the taking a hold of that creates the basis for all the stories. We'll go through a couple of examples, but the key thing is once we've taken a hold, suffering becomes inevitable.

So grasping or clinging—the word in Pali is the same: upadana. Sometimes we translate it as grasping, which is like the first act of taking a hold. Sometimes we translate it as clinging when we more notice we've been holding on for a while and that's continuing. It's the same word. It's this locking into or fixating upon some aspect of our experience based on its pleasant or unpleasant nature. And then the chain of dependent origination just goes on from the clinging to end up in suffering. Once clinging has happened,

there is suffering. It may be mild, it may be great, but it's inevitable.

So the central four links—contact, feeling, craving, and clinging—are the ones that we can examine in our practice and look at on a moment-to-moment basis. And we start to see that this is what confronts us from the time we're infants. From the time we're infants, all these varied objects of the world come into our experience. And we start developing relationships with them.

Mother. Breast. Food. Father. School. High school. Attractive people, college, sex, work, job, career, taxes, income taxes, Britney Spears, MTV, Barack Obama, global economic crisis, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. All these different things come into our experience, some beautiful, some scary, and so we hang on to them. We fixate on all these parts of our experience.

When we grasp, we create an I. We make a self around that—the self that likes or dislikes, that wants or doesn't want, in relation to that thing. We talked about this last week with the five aggregates.

Simple example. You're on the eight precepts. You go down to the dining hall at tea for your little glass of juice, which the cooks have very kindly put out. But you notice something really good on the main table. There's this soup that smells better than anything you've had since the Thai restaurant two months ago. And you get a waft of this, and maybe there's some cheese out with the crackers—a nice brie.

And you start thinking, "Oh, I wish I weren't on eight precepts tonight. I didn't eat enough at lunch and I'm starting to feel really hungry, and all I've got is this miserable glass of juice and these people are having soup and brie. Maybe I could just go off eight precepts for one night. Because I was so good at lunch, I ate moderately, but I didn't realize there was going to be such a good tea. And gosh, that smells so good, and I'm really hungry now. And look at all of them—they're enjoying their food so much. I've been such a good yogi. I should do it. I should just drop my eight precepts. I didn't write the kitchen, though. I might be causing to run out of food. Maybe I better not do that. Oh, I'll just have my glass of juice and walk out."

So we walk out and maybe we regret our decision. We kind of chew on that for a while. And we go up the hill and maybe we do our yoga or we do a sit or a walk. But inwardly, we're kind of stirred up and blaming ourselves: "Why did I take eight precepts in the first place? I don't think it's really so good for my digestion."

So at this point, we've really fully taken birth as, let's say, the hungry yogi. The hungry yogi walks up the hill, still stirring and thinking about the food down there. But after a while, we let go of it. We always let go of it, don't we?

It doesn't matter how significant an experience feels on retreat—we always let go of it. Perhaps we're doing yoga, perhaps settling into meditation. We let go and the mind comes back into balance. This always happens. We've taken birth, but the mind returns to balance.

This coming back into balance is crucial to notice. This is a return to what Upasaka Ki calls the normal

mind—a touchstone for her teachings. I would actually say it's not so normal; it's rather unusual in the world at large. I prefer to call it the natural mind. So we return to this natural mind, and we're balanced again. Things have cooled out and we're not suffering. What's happened is we've taken birth, then that hungry yogi birth passes away, and we're back in the natural mind, a balanced place.

But here's another example. Let's say we're sitting in meditation a few weeks into retreat, and the concentration has developed. In this sitting, we find the body really relaxed. The mind is very present, effortlessly. We notice thoughts coming and going, but they don't actually take us out of the present moment. If we want, we could stay with breath after breath—quite easy and comfortable. It doesn't take strong effort. We're relaxed and just present. It's so delightful.

And then we think—or I thought when I started, because I had a linear idea of practice—the rest of the retreat's going to be like this now. Wow. It went all through the sitting. Let's take this out for a walk. Then walking, pretty present, still concentrated, really feeling the sensations of the feet. This is great. My whole life could be like this.

Imagine if I could do my job like this. I would be so impressive. I'd get a great salary because I could deal with the clients nobody else could deal with. And in my relationship, I could be really supportive of my partner even when they do those crazy things. I wouldn't get upset at all—just have a wonderful, loving relationship. This is fantastic. I can't wait to go back and sit again and get a taste of the rest of my life.

We go back in and sit again—and the concentration's over. The mind is all over the place. We've been stirred up by the fantasies. We can't connect with the breath. We don't feel relaxed in the body. There's tremendous energy. We've lost that beautiful sitting and that concentrated mind and that ideal life. All gone.

This is painful too. This takes a while to let go of, but eventually we do, don't we? That passes—more water under the bridge—we come back into balance, the natural mind returns, and we carry on. So we recover.

In the first example with the hungry yogi, we took birth by clinging to an unpleasant experience—a sensation of hunger and desire for food. It was a difficult birth. We were stirred up, agitated, an unhappy self. But when we died, it was something of a relief.

When that hungry yogi died, oh, return to peace. So in that case, it was an unhappy birth but a pleasant death.

But when you're a concentrated yogi, the good yogi takes birth. It's a very pleasant birth. "Wow, super yogi. Just what we've been waiting for and working toward all this time. It's finally here. I've got it." So we attach to that. It's really a kind of heaven realm birth, to tell you the truth. The hungry yogi is a bit of a hungry ghost realm birth. The good yogi, heaven realm birth—really easy, everything's delightful, but then it doesn't last. We pass out of that heaven realm, and the birth was pleasant, but the death is painful.

So either way, if we hang on to pain, it's a painful birth, pleasant death. If we hang on to pleasure, it's a happy birth and a painful passing away. But either way, we construct a self out of the pleasant and painful events of our experience, and it leads to suffering. Either way, this construction of a self brings us into suffering.

Things like a good meditation or a pleasant meal are relatively minor in the overall scheme of things. The bigger things are these patterns of becoming that we've talked about—the patterns of becoming that are based on the creation of who we take ourselves to be. We all carry some kind of self-image. As long as we're not free, we have some view about who we are. This points to sakkāya-diṭṭhi that we talked about with the five aggregates.

We form an identity in order to create something solid and lasting in a world that's only characterized by change. That's what the construction of self is basically about—something enduring in this world of change. And then we use the events of our perceptions and proliferations to reinforce that self-view or sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

If we have a view that has a lot of self-judgment, that we're not adequate, then we'll take the things that happen as confirmation of that view. Like when I talked about having an empty chair next to me in a conference dining hall—the empty chair meant, "Oh, nobody liked me. Nobody wanted to sit near me." It's just an empty chair, for God's sake. But if it's coupled with self-judging, it means something. It means I'm not worthy or adequate.

So a lot of the content of retreat gets taken up, and a lot of the proliferations are about these patterns of becoming some kind of self-view in some way or another. If it's not about inadequacy, it may be about achievement. You're sitting and you have a great idea related to your work at home. And it's brilliant. So you want to go back to your room and write, maybe write the first chapter of that novel that's going to make you the first great American Dharma author. We're still waiting for that book—the great American Dharma book. You're going to be the first one to write it and you'd better get it down now. And it will lead to all kinds of fame and fortune because there are a lot of Buddhists in the world today. And the Dalai Lama will probably invite you to teach with him because you're such a great representative.

So this is another form of becoming that comes up. Some of the most difficult kinds of patterns to deal with are when the emotions that are coming are the difficult part of our self-view. Like when I worked with fear for so many years, every time the fear came up, it reminded me, "This is the biggest problem in my life. I don't know how to liberate it. It seems like it's always been here. It's here now," and that leads to a projection: "It's always going to be here in the future."

So we construct this self-view based upon this ongoing pattern related to a painful emotional experience, which could be fear or self-judgment or a sense of being betrayed or abandonment—many different forms of this. The difficult emotions feed into the self-image and reinforce it, offering more proof that that's actually what's happening, that that's the way we're put together and that's going to continue.

So these are all different forms of becoming, tied into who we take ourselves to be or who we'd like to be. And these patterns become quite burdensome, some of the most burdensome things we experience in retreat. Whether it's patterns of aggrandizement and becoming something in the world, or whether it's patterns of the opposite side of conceit—the negative, inferior kind of conceit and self-judgment—either way, we tend to hold these tightly and believe in them. This is part of the workings of karma.

Andy Olendzki, who's the head of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, put it very beautifully about this process of self and grasping. He said, "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 on to or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

So you ask, well, what does the grasping? There's no answer to that. This is a faculty of mind that inclines toward an object and then fixates on it out of some emotional drive of desire or aversion. So the grasping takes place and it's the grasping that constructs the sense of self. And once grasping has happened, the self is created. That means birth has happened and that means death will happen. And there's suffering in that whole chain, which typically gets repeated again and again.

There's this image in Asia that's spoken about that's quite similar to this process. If you've ever watched a monkey swing through the trees of a jungle, they'll be hanging on to one vine and they'll swing and they won't let go of that vine until there's another one very close that they see they can grab hold of. So they'll let go of one only to take up the next in a split second. And then they'll swing on that and only let go to take up the next in a split second. This is the way the undeveloped mind relates to experience—grasping at one moment after another to keep reconstructing the sense of self, the experience of "I," because the untrained mind believes that's where security is.

So the great thing is, meditators have another choice. And it's so wonderful when you start to see this, and all of you are able to see this at times. The question is, can this chain be broken? It seems so inevitable: contact, feeling, craving, clinging. Can it be broken?

What the Buddha said is that the most logical place for the break is between feeling and craving. And that's what we've spent a lot of time talking about—that it's possible to have a pleasant feeling without going into greed. It's possible to have an unpleasant feeling without going into aversion. And you all have been talking about this in interviews day after day, so I know this is happening in your experience.

So what happens? A pleasant thing is there, but the mind isn't driven into greed. An unpleasant experience is there and the mind isn't driven into aversion. This is the way out.

Start to look at the experience when there's that space between feeling and craving. Basically, when craving doesn't arise based on feeling, then clinging doesn't happen and it doesn't lead to suffering. So by not taking hold, you've stepped out of the whole cycle. This is basically the cycle of samsara. And by not

taking hold, you have stepped out. So this is what gets us off the wheel.

And it basically means pleasant experiences there, unpleasant experiences there, neutral experiences there, but we're not taking hold of it. So we're not falling into greed, aversion, and delusion. So it basically means the mind is equanimous or balanced, and we're out of that cycle.

This place where the mind is not in greed, aversion, or delusion is what we sometimes call the sweet spot of meditation. This is a kind of special place when it happens, and it happens a lot during the day. If we start to look for it, it happens in formal times and it happens in informal times. It happens when we're intending it with strong mindfulness, and there are lots of moments where it just happens on its own, but we may not notice it.

So this is the central pointing of dependent origination—not to let feeling drive us into craving, which means greed, aversion, delusion. So we start to get a sense of some space opening up between a moment of feeling and a moment of craving. And just letting that space happen is the place we want to allow the meditation to develop.

So one teacher put it this way: the whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving. The whole of the path.

So start to explore what this feels like. You're not taking birth, yet you're authentically present and aware. It can be profoundly alive. You're not grasping hold. Different practitioners use various words to describe this state—restful, easeful, peaceful, balanced, equanimous, non-conflicted, free from struggle and agenda.

The word I want to emphasize for your exploration is freedom. This is a place of genuine freedom because the mind isn't being controlled by the conditioned events that unfold. The conditioned experience of the pleasant tends to drive the mind toward greed. The conditioned experience of the unpleasant tends to drive the mind toward aversion. The conditioned experience of neutrality tends to drive the mind toward delusion. But these reactive formations aren't arising. You're not being determined by conditions. The mind is not being determined by the changing circumstances of experience.

Because of this freedom from the conditionality of experience, there's a subtle taste of what is not conditioned—what is unconditioned. Another way to express this is that we can see conditioned phenomena as they truly are, and we can perceive the Dhamma in its authentic nature.

Let me share a passage from Ajahn Chah that illuminates this understanding:

"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 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."

Resting in that gap means we're not grasping and we're not subject to birth. We're not generating a new identity through clinging. Not being subject to birth, we're not subject to death. In this gap, there's a subtle taste of what's called the deathless—a synonym for nirvana.

In the Thai forest tradition, they describe this experience as a preview of nibbana, like a coming attraction. It's not the complete realization but rather what Ajahn Buddhadasa called "temporary nibbana." It's not the full experience of the unconditioned, but it offers a genuine taste. The peace we feel there is a partial expression of the absolute peace of the unconditioned. It's as if the obscurations have lifted enough for us to sense how that peace naturally emanates.

Imagine walking and suddenly catching the aroma of bread baking somewhere. You can follow that fragrance to its source, to the bakery itself. When we first experience this peace in meditation, it's like catching that initial whiff of the unconditioned. Following it leads us to the very source of that peace.

There's a beautiful series of suttas in the Sutta Nipata where a group of Brahmin youths approach the Buddha with sincere questions. In ancient India, the Brahmins represented the religious elite—wealthy, holding a monopoly on sanctioned spirituality, masters of countless complex rules and privileged knowledge systems that were difficult to access.

Then appeared these wandering ascetics like the Buddha—penniless, clothed in rags, surviving on alms, dwelling in wilderness and forests. They were spiritual revolutionaries, challenging the established Brahminical order. Many Brahmins resisted, dismissively calling them "those bald-pated recluses coming to town."

But in this particular encounter, these Brahmin youths approached the Buddha with genuine curiosity, truly interested in exploring and understanding the depths of spiritual life.

So there's a series of dialogues, and this is one of them. This Brahmin youth named Todaya says to the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you have liked to be able to ask the Buddha that? What is that liberation like?

And the Buddha replied, "That sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." By not holding on, we don't get entangled in this manufacturing of self again and again and again. So this word becoming appears a lot in the literature.

This is from Ajahn Chah. And just imagine that this talk is being given by Ajahn Chah in a Thai Dharma hall. So a lot of the Thai Dharma halls are basically open-air pavilions. They have a floor. They have a roof and pillars around the outside supporting the roof, but no walls because the climate is so mild. So a lot of Dharma talks in Thailand are given in these open-air halls.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "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." When we're not standing on anything through clinging, that is our emptiness. That is our temporary nibbana. That is our freedom. We're not taking birth. We're not creating something. And we're not dying.

So our meditation starts to reveal this kind of deathless place. It's not so much that we've fabricated it, that we've constructed it by a lot of doing. It's by refraining from doing. It's when feeling is there, but we don't grasp at it. It's when we restrain the craving and clinging that this place opens up. So it's not particularly created through activity. It's created through non-doing.

I don't know if you remember from the first session—I talked about what an important place non-doing has in the Dharma. This is where that really becomes clear. It's through not taking hold, not getting stirred up, and not forming reactions that this place of the deathless opens up to us.

Because it's based on non-doing, not something constructed, it's always available. It's available when we stop the doings.

This is from Ajahn Jumnien, another teacher in the Thai forest lineage: "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 it's kind of nice because everything's still coming and going. It's not that we've cut off experience. And because there's full awareness—you have to be pretty aware not to crave—because there's full awareness, we know them all. So there's this clear knowing of everything that's coming and going, and it's still mixed, pleasant and unpleasant. But because of this balance, we're not reacting. And that's what opens the door to this Dhamma, to this deathless.

As we start to feel the freedom that's in this place, we can start to see that maybe this is at least partly what we're practicing for. Because it's free, it opens up a lot of other beautiful qualities. When we're not constricted, you could describe it as peace or ease or balance or equanimity. It's also kind of the open door for love and compassion and joy and insight for wisdom to arise. So when there's that experience of freedom, there's a lot of potential there. So I like to think of it as something of a goal in practice.

You know, it would be interesting to reflect on what you described as your intention for this retreat when you talked about it in the group on the first day or what you reflected about later. But look and see if in your intention and aspiration there isn't something like this that's a real part of it.

As we start to get a taste of this kind of freedom, we start to realize: maybe this is what I've been looking for. This deathless place that's out of the cycle of suffering and creates the open door for all the beautiful qualities to come through. So it's kind of a goal, but we aren't stable in it yet. So we don't want to stop the path.

Now, what's the most effective way to move along the path? Maybe it's through this goal. Maybe this resting in the deathless is the most effective way to weaken the kilesas, to weaken the force of craving, because it's kind of retraining the mind. And the door is open for wisdom and insight to come through this. So maybe this is not only the goal, but it's also our best understanding of what the path is.

In this way, the path and the goal kind of come together. And the goal has that sense of fruition and some satisfaction, some arriving. So it really lets us appreciate the journey that we've gone through in meditation to reach this point. We can just appreciate the journey and appreciate ourselves for taking it and realize that we're manifesting, to some degree, some of our aspiration.

And then also because it's not stable yet—this place, we come into it and we lose it—it can renew our dedication to keep walking until it's stable. We want to be able to abide in this through any situation. So we need to keep walking the path, but we kind of understand this now becomes the path for us also.

When we hit this point, sometimes there's a little bit of a shift in the way we want to practice. And Carol has alluded to this a number of times when she's talked about how it doesn't matter what we're paying attention to and that the awareness itself can get more interesting than the objects that we're aware of.

What's being suggested there is a kind of move from a focus on the objects to a focus on the quality of the mind that's knowing. And that's what this shift to the understanding of this resting in the gap between feeling and craving is also pointing to. Let's look at the mind itself and see if we can abide in that place of balance, that place of unborn and undying.

So a couple of ways in. I'll talk about two tonight and then we'll do a guided meditation in the morning that will offer another one.

One way in—we've talked around this, but I don't know if we've said it so clearly—comes from some teachings from a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He points to a way to work with attitude that leads in this direction.

One of his teachings is about looking at the attitude of mind or how we're relating to our experience, moment by moment, to see if reactive formations are coming in. So he says, one of his teachings says, ask the question: In this moment, is there greed, aversion, or delusion in your mind? And you can ask this

question fairly often.

Well, sometimes it's not that easy to know the answer when you look. So he's got some other questions to clear this up. He said, okay, are you wanting something else to happen that's not happening? That occasionally happens, doesn't it? That's the presence of greed. Are you wanting something to stop happening? That sometimes happens too, right? Knee pain, mental state, wandering mind. That's aversion. Are you not in touch with what's happening? Are you spaced out, lost in thought? He said, that's delusion.

Now usually by the time you've asked the question, you're not deluded anymore. So usually the answer when you ask, "Am I out of touch?" is no—we're back in touch. But often, very often, we'll see one of the first two: greed or aversion.

If that happens, then pay attention to that attitude of mind. Take that as a subject for the mindfulness. You don't have to judge it. You don't have to try to make it go away. Just become mindful of that. Greed feels like this. Aversion feels like this. Let that be your meditation subject.

When I first started doing this practice of checking the attitude, I was doing kind of an open, choiceless attention using light noting. And then about five times a sitting, I would just turn back and look at the attitude in mind. I would ask these three questions, and if there was a formation, I would stay with it for a while.

Then after asking the questions enough times, I got really familiar with the practice and I could just turn and see if there was greed, aversion, or delusion. I didn't have to go through much thinking about it.

Once I could do that—just turn and see the attitude—it became quite comfortable to do it more often. So I would do it maybe ten times in a sitting. Just check. Then I found that if my attention was stable in the present moment, I never had to go back to the objects. I could just stay with that quality of attitude as my main focus.

So I would just hang out in this place of balance and look for when the mind left it. It takes some stability to do that, but if you've got some stability, it's quite a nice practice to do.

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

So she's saying the same thing. Stay with the balance of heart and mind, and notice if it's moving out to some form of grasping. If not, just stay there in that balance. This is one meditation that works very nicely that way.

The other meditation is to take a look at the quality of consciousness itself. You can play with this one just in the last minutes of the talk. Let your eyes be open and send your interest around the room and fall on

the different objects. Some of them may be pleasant—looking at the Buddha images or the flowers on the altar, some of the nice shawls people are wearing, quality of light and wood in the hall. Some of them may be unpleasant or striking you in an unpleasant way—a little bit of chaos up here on the platform that I often wish we could clean up, some disorganization in the hall, some color that doesn't strike you as particularly appealing today.

So let your eyes just roam around—different people, pleasant, unpleasant, different focuses. Feel yourself being drawn into likes and dislikes. Let that all happen.

And now, turn that consciousness, turn that awareness to look at itself. Turn it back inwards to what is doing the looking. Who's looking? Who's looking? There's looking, looking, looking, going out, out, out, liking, disliking. Who's looking? Look back inside at the center. Where is that coming from? This is turning consciousness back to look at itself.

And you may feel, when you do that, that some little shift happens inwardly. Anybody feel a little shift from that? Okay, maybe subtle. We'll do one tomorrow morning that will probably be a little easier to find.

This is also a way to practice that cuts down the fascination with objects and lets the mind rest in its own capacity more. Again from Upasika Kee: "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're turning inward. We stay with the awareness or the consciousness or the heart. And that cuts the fascination with the other objects of the senses. It makes life simpler, makes practice simpler. And it can feel like a kind of home.

This inward turning that she describes doesn't mean we cut ourselves off from the world. When you turn to awareness itself, do you lose touch with the room, with the people, with the sights? No. We're still fully aware of everything, but we're simply not as entangled or enmeshed with it all.

This can be another skillful way to practice. Both of these directions—checking on attitude and turning awareness back on itself—share this quality of disentangling us from complications with the phenomena of the senses. They allow us to find an approach to meditation where we can rest in this quality that's free from birth and death, this gap between feeling and craving.

Let me close with a quotation from another of these dialogues with the Brahmin youths that the Buddha was having. This youth was named Kappa, and this is the question he put 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."

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 together.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death.

Thank you for listening.

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