Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:50

A couple of talks ago I talked about how we construct this sense of self again and again and how our proliferations of thought lead us into that territory and how the sense of self is felt as limiting and constricting and leads us into different kinds of unhappiness and difficulty.

Tonight I want to talk some more about how that sense of self gets constructed, and then I also want to look at how it can be released.

Hopefully the motivation for all of us in doing Dharma practice is to some extent a way to find greater freedom in our life—freedom of heart, freedom of mind. And I think there's an important question to ask around this question of freedom: will we know it when we see it? And does freedom only come at the very end of a long, long path?

Because there is the possibility of that kind of freedom. That's what the Buddha pointed to again and again. He called it an unshakable deliverance of mind where the heart is freed from the constrictions of greed or aversion or confusion. So we might know when we hit that point, but that might not happen this retreat.

In a shorter term, is there such a thing as freedom? And what would that feel like? How would we know it when we encounter it? How can we recognize it? Because if we can recognize that and feel it coming alive in our practice, it can give us a lot of confidence, a lot of faith, and a lot of sense that the practice is taking us in the direction that we want to go. And it's very supportive.

So the talk tonight is titled Unentangled Knowing. This is a term that was used by a Thai laywoman teacher named Upasika Kee. For those of you who aren't native English speakers, this is a funny term, unentangled. Tangle, you probably know, means twisting or snarling or knotting up of different threads or yarn or string that makes a mess that's hard to pull apart. Then the verb entangle is just the process of making that tangle happen. And then putting "un" in front of it means we don't go into the creation of that tangle. So this is what Upasika Kee is pointing to in meditation: How do we keep from getting all tangled up in our experience?

Because the Buddha used this concept of a tangle over and over again to point to the way that we relate to the experience of living. He put it in a couple of different ways that I'll just mention briefly.

One quote: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." This is a powerful image. Everywhere you look in the world, you can see this, can't you? How people's actions for getting or pushing away cause so much confusion and pain and harm to one another.

Or here's another quotation. This quotation was used as the opening to the Visuddhimagga, a 6th century commentarial text—a standard meditation manual in our tradition. This is the opening framing of the Visuddhimagga:

"A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle." True, isn't it? "So I ask of Gotama this question"—this is a Buddhist family name, Gotama—"who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

The answer that the Visuddhimagga gives is that one who is developed in conduct, in meditation, and in wisdom disentangles this tangle and goes toward freedom.

So Upasika Kee used this image in one of her talks, "An Unentangled Knowing," and I first want to just mention who she is. She has a really wonderful book that's been translated into English of her talks called Pure and Simple. It was translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, and I really recommend it. It's a very good Dharma book and one of the best books by a woman in our tradition that I'm aware of.

She started to teach in the 1950s, and then she died in 1978. So she taught for close to 30 years in a small setting in Thailand, but she became very well known. Thanissaro Bhikkhu says that she was the foremost woman teacher in Thailand in the 20th century. So that's a strong statement. One does not find so many women teachers in Thailand because the monks have a little bit of a monopoly on the Dhamma. But she stood out for the depth and the purity of her teaching, and also because she was a laywoman. She wasn't even an ordained nun. She taught as a layperson. And yet her Dhamma was very deep and profound.

So this is the quote that I want to build the talk around today: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside."

Maybe that'll give you a little bit of a flavor.

An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside. So I'll go through this in more detail as we go, but I wanted to frame it in that way.

What she's pointing to is a knowing—another synonym for awareness or mindfulness—that's clearly in touch with all the elements of our experience without getting caught up or tangled in them. In order to understand how we can be with our experience with awareness but not get tangled up, we want to do what the Buddha did, which is to analyze how we get tangled.

You'll notice that the Buddha was very precise about explaining how suffering and this bondage and limitation happen. And by understanding it clearly with wisdom, we understand how to release it and how to be free.

I think this unentangled knowing is happening for all of us in many moments during the day. This is not something that will be new for you, but we may not be tuning into it. So I hope by looking at the way that we often get caught and the way it is to be released, you'll start to notice when it's happening and that will

accelerate the process of freeing ourselves.

Toward the end of the talk, I also want to describe a few meditation approaches that lead in this direction of unentangled knowing.

As I begin, I want to mention that the vocabulary in this talk is drawn largely from the Thai forest tradition. Upasika Ki taught in that tradition, and I'll use many references from that lineage. It's a little different from the vocabulary and some of the understandings you'd find in other Theravadan schools.

For example, our meditation instructions come from the teachings of Mahasi Sayadaw. He was a Burmese monk, very orthodox in terms of his place in the Theravadan tradition and connection to the Visuddhimagga and the Abhidhamma. This brings about tremendous precision and clarity in relationship to the events in our experience.

The Thai forest tradition is a little more open-minded, I would say. It has more of a heart quality. What's interesting about Spirit Rock is that we hold both these lineages in our teachings here. Our meditation instructions and much of our approach comes from the Burmese side of Mahasi Sayadaw, and yet much of the spirit and the reverence for nature comes from the Thai forest tradition.

It's kind of interesting to marry these two schools, which have not been so married in Asia. In Asia, the schools are going down their own tracks, and here we're bringing them together. So tonight I want to talk largely from the perspective of the Thai forest.

We want to understand how the constriction happens, how the self gets constructed in order to see how we can release that. The model that I want to use tonight for showing this construction of self is that of dependent origination—what may be the most profound insight of the Buddha.

But I don't want to go through the whole chain tonight. Dependent origination is described in terms of twelve causal links that begin with ignorance, lead through momentary experience, and land in suffering. And then the suffering tends to cause more ignorance and starts the chain again. So it describes the way beings get locked into the cycle of suffering again and again until we find a path. By understanding how it arises, we also learn how to release it.

In dependent origination, there are twelve links, but tonight I only want to focus on four—what I consider the heart of the chain for a practitioner. The first five links get kind of philosophical, and we don't need to go there tonight. Then there are the four very experiential links, and then the last three links are also kind of philosophical. So we're just going to go into the links that I think map most closely onto our experience.

To begin, I want to come back to something we've talked about before. What's our basic situation as human beings or sentient beings? I think we've said that we are aware, and in that awareness, we are always having contact. Things are impinging on our senses of varying natures.

This is one of the discourses where the Buddha talked about this, and he started by addressing the

bhikkhus. In this context, I think someone mentioned bhikkhu means a dedicated person of practice. So male or female, lay or monastic, you are all bhikkhus for the sake of this retreat.

He said, "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully and I will teach you the totality of life." I love this as an opening. Who would dare to say this? Einstein didn't say it. Marx didn't say it. Freud didn't say it. But here's the Buddha 2600 years ago: "I'll teach you the totality of life."

And what is the totality? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who claimed to describe a totality other than this would not know what they were talking about.

I love this description because it frames our experience in a way that's really simple to understand. I think it's the genius of the way the Buddha saw that he could see life in such simple and direct terms. So many other systems—and I would include Einstein, Marx, and Freud—get so conceptual, they're built on proliferation.

The Buddhist system brings us into direct experience. You may have heard the phrase, perhaps from Gestalt therapy, "lose your mind and come to your senses." This points to the same truth. We are trying to extricate ourselves from the entire web of conceptual proliferation, which is so complicating and not always truthful, and return to the direct moment-to-moment experience of life.

The direct moment-to-moment experience is remarkably simple. There are only ever six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, and objects of mind—primarily thoughts and emotions. If you master your relationship to each of these six fields, you master life. It's that simple. But it's not that simple, is it? Still, this gives us a very clear framework to approach our experience, and it's the framework from which our meditation is drawn. We're learning to be mindful in these six sense spheres of sight, sound, smell, taste, sensation, thoughts, and feelings. This is where mindfulness is established.

There's one other essential element we need to bring in. When we encounter sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, we're aware of them. That awareness is a key piece, or we could call it consciousness. When a sound arises, we hear it. That hearing has an element of awareness or knowing—consciousness. There's a knowing of the sound that arises with the sound. If the sound arose next to a dead body, would the awareness be there? No. Consciousness has departed from the body, so there wouldn't be any hearing experience. But we're awake, we're alive, we're conscious, and we hear the sound.

So there's the sound and the hearing of it because our ears are working. The meeting of these three—the sound, the ear, and the consciousness—is what makes for contact. Because we're conscious, we're experiencing contact at these six sense doors.

This is the first link of dependent origination that we'll start with: the link of contact. It simply means that our senses are alive, we're conscious, they're functioning, and we're having experiences of seeing and hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking and feeling. Contact is happening at the six sense doors

all the time when we're awake. Can you turn it off? Can you simply say, "I'll stop seeing" with your eyes open, "I'll stop hearing"? No, it's happening all the time. So this is the first link—actually the sixth link in the chain of dependent arising, but the first link we'll look at tonight.

Contact is happening constantly at these six sense doors. Then contact leads to the next link in the chain: feeling tone, or vedanā, which Temple spoke about several nights ago. This means that as contact is happening, these six kinds of sense objects are being registered as pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful. Can you choose whether the contacts feel pleasant or painful? Can you monitor it and say, "Let all my contacts be pleasant"? Not possible, is it? The contacts come through and the difficulty is they vary widely. Some are very pleasurable, some are very painful, some are fairly neutral. We're simply on the receiving end of that effect. This variation is what makes life challenging. We don't know what to expect. It's part of the uncertainty.

Feeling tone is so central and important because it's the basis for reactive formations. When the feeling tone is pleasant, if you're not paying attention, what's the conditioned reaction to pleasant feeling? Greed, isn't it? You want to hold on, keep a hold of the pleasant. What's a conditioned reaction for something that's unpleasant? Aversion—we want to push it away. What's a conditioned reaction for something that's neutral? Delusion. We don't notice it because we're so preoccupied with the pleasant and the painful.

So these three conditioned reactions of greed, aversion, and delusion go together to make up the next link in the chain. If we're not mindful, the conditioned reaction is summed up with the word craving. Craving is the force that Sally talked about a few nights ago. It's the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. It emphasizes the desire force, so it seems more closely related to greed.

But if you think about it closely, aversion is also expressing a kind of desire. Aversion says, "I don't want this experience, I want that experience." So it's expressing a strong preference too. Craving can manifest as either greed or aversion. And the delusion is we don't see it. We don't see how greed and aversion operate and keep the mind spinning. When we start to see it, which mindfulness uncovers for us, then we start to realize this doesn't work so well. And we start to let go a little more of those reactive formations.

So you could say that craving encompasses greed, aversion, and delusion, or is made up of greed, aversion, and delusion. And it stands for the reactive formations toward pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral objects brought about through contact. So craving is the next link in the chain of dependent arising. We have contact. Based on contact, there's feeling. Based on feeling, the reactive formation is craving.

And then feel what happens when craving comes in. There's the first kind of recognition that there's something happening there that might be either pleasant or repellent. You want to go toward it or you want to go away. The mind leans toward it and then the next thing that happens is we take a hold of it. Obviously we take a hold of the pleasant to hold on, but in order to push something away, we have to take a hold of that too in order to push away. So this taking a hold quality is known as grasping or clinging. So that's the fourth link that we're going to look at tonight.

Out of the reactive formation comes this movement toward that takes a hold of. And that's how craving leads right into clinging. The reactive formation leads the mind to fixate on that thing that has captured our attention and then to take a hold of it, either to pull it toward or to push it away.

So you can sort of see the way the links go. There's contact. The contact brings feeling. The feeling conditions craving, and the craving leads us to fixate, take a hold of, and cling.

Now these four steps happen so quickly that it's very hard to separate them out. It's almost like there's a pleasant contact and we've taken a hold of it. So don't think that in your mindfulness you're going to be able to break it down. "Oh, there's contact for a few seconds. I'll get cozy with that. Then a few seconds later some feeling tone will come up and I'll see that forming. I got that. And then a few seconds later there's some wanting. Then the mind slowly inclines to take a hold of it."

I wish it were that easy. But instead it's like knee pain, grasping, "Ah, ah, ah."

So you have to kind of explore this territory again and again to pick out the individual pieces. All four can go by in a second. But as the mind slows down, as the concentration develops, you start to pick it up. You pick up maybe one of them in one sequence. And in another sequence, you pick up another one. And then you see another one. So little by little, as the mind slows, you'll start to get a feeling. But you need to examine it and explore it in your direct experience a number of times in order to see these four links working together. And then you'll see it's quite a brilliant description of moment to moment, how we go from contact, which is just automatic for a sentient being. All sentient beings are having this contact to getting tangled with it. It's the craving and clinging that make for the tangle. Because we want to stop time and take a hold of something or make it go a different direction. Then we become entangled with the simple facts of our experience based on these reactive formations of liking and disliking.

So you can see this happening over and over again in life from the time that we're babies. All these different objects come into our world and we have to make relations to them.

That's kind of what growing up is about—finding our relationship to all the features of life. So we start making relationship with mother and breast and food and father and playmates and school and homework and high school and attractive people and college and sex and work and career and Lady Gaga and MTV and Barack Obama and the global economic crisis.

In all of that, there are going to be things we really want to hold to and things we really don't want anywhere near us. And our life gets tangled up in all these likes and dislikes, becomes so complicated.

The basic message of the chain of dependent arising—we've just gone through one section of it—is that once you've gone into clinging, there's going to be suffering. That's the heart. Clinging leads inevitably to suffering, and we'll go through why that is with a couple of examples.

Let's say you're an eight-precept yogi and you wander down to the dining hall this evening feeling a little

hungry, but you want to go down for that nice glass of juice that the cooks are putting out for you. So you wander down and as you walk in the door, you get the smell of the tom yum soup. Oh, those Thai spices—they're like the best. And you're so hungry, and you start thinking, "Why did I ever take eight precepts? A little hot Thai soup would be so nice tonight. Why did I do that?"

And then you see the peanut butter. Oh, no. Missing the spreads, too.

So you go over and pour yourself your little glass of juice and sit down at a table and watch other people enjoying their peanut butter and crackers and smell that tom yum soup. And you go, "Why did I ever do this? I'm so hungry. Maybe I should just go off tonight. Could I just go off for one night? But then I'd throw off the cook's count and people have seen me with my juice and they'd think I was being a really bad eight-precept yogi if I did that. Maybe I could come back in later, sneak in after they've all gone and get a little bit of the crackers and peanut butter. But I wouldn't feel so good about myself if I did that. And so, oh, this eight-precept thing—I should never have done this in the first place. I should have just gone on a system where I could eat if I wanted and didn't eat if I didn't want."

You can sort of go on like this for a while, right? One can spin out for a while on the food issue on eight precepts, for sure.

So what's happened is there's been a contact, which has been pleasant. There's been a craving, and it's led to a judgment of one's own situation and a disliking: Don't like this eight-precept stuff.

In that taking hold of the food situation—being on eight precepts and being hungry—what we do is we construct a new self. We construct the self which is, "Now I'm the hungry yogi. I'm the hungry yogi who's dissatisfied with the eight-precept resolution." And then we dwell in that for a while. We take birth as that hungry yogi. Might be for thirty minutes, might be for an hour, might have gone into the next sitting. Feel the stomach rumbling; the juice didn't fill it up. I'm still feeling hungry.

So we take birth as this hungry yogi for a while, and it's not a very happy birth. And then eventually that clinging is released. We're not going to carry this issue around the rest of the retreat. At some point, we're going to drop it. And when we drop it, the mind comes back into some kind of balance, which it always does. Upasaka Ki calls this the natural mind. When the mind comes back into balance and things are cool again, that's the natural mind.

So we've dropped the fixation on the hungry yogi. We've come back into balance, natural mind, things are nice again. So what we could say is that hungry yogi died for us to return to the natural mind. Here we had the formation of a new self. It was a new birth, the hungry yogi. And then after a while, that being, that self was temporary and it died. So we had a painful birth, but the death was actually quite pleasant. Taking hold of something difficult, we have a painful birth but a happy death.

Now suppose you come in at 6:30 and you have a really concentrated sitting. And then there's the delight of mastering the subject of concentration and being at ease, being relaxed, being effortlessly present,

being able to stay steady with my attention minute after minute. And then we start to think, "I'm really getting the hang of this meditation."

Now that I've got it, the rest of the retreat is going to be like this. I finally figured it out. I'll be able to meditate like this, and I think I'll be able to take this back into my daily life. So I found the secret. I'm going to be able to be like this in my relationships, in my job, with my family. This is so cool. I'll just be so mellow in everything I do—wise and compassionate. Gosh, this is great.

And then we get up and 7:15 comes and the bell rings. We go outside and trip over something, or somebody's in our way on our path to the restroom, and all that nice mellow energy fades. We get a little disgruntled and our faith is shaken. Maybe I'm not going to be able to carry this forward anymore. We get very stirred up and come into the dharma talk just wanting some nice reassuring words from James, but unfortunately the talk is on some difficult theme like dependent origination. Oh no. It's such a bummer.

So here, the birth has been quite pleasant. We've taken birth as the good yogi, the concentrated yogi, the successful yogi. And it's a very pleasant place to be. We look at the rest of our life and it looks really open and beautiful and inviting. Our relationships, our daily life, our work—they all look great. It's a wonderful birth, kind of a heaven realm birth. I can float through the rest of my life on this concentration cloud. It's really groovy.

And then we go out, a few things happen, and it breaks up. That death is really painful. There's such a longing to be back in that concentrated state.

So here we've taken hold of something pleasant, but when it changes, that being dies and that death is really difficult. With the hungry yogi, we had an unhappy birth but a pleasant death by taking hold of the food issue. By taking hold of the concentration issue, we had a very pleasant birth but a painful death.

So either way, whether we hang on to the pleasure or the pain, there's suffering—either immediately or when it changes. Clinging inevitably leads to some kind of pain, immediate or through impermanence. So that "I" dies away, and one way or another, we suffer.

What we're starting to see is that this taking hold of, this act of clinging or grasping—and they're the same word in Pali, by the way—we use different words in English, but the Pali word is upadana. We use "grasping" to refer to the act of first taking hold, and we use "clinging" to refer to the ongoing quality of holding on. It's the same word in Pali, and that's this link of upadana.

What happens is when we hold on to something, we make a self. We take birth as a new "I" through this holding on. And in birth, there's going to be some kind of suffering. So this grasping is synonymous with the creation of a new self.

Andy Olendzki, the scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, explains this well: "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."

The key thing is that grasping is not something that you or I do, but rather when grasping takes place, a new sense of self is born. And that's all that it is. That's all that the sense of "I" is—just a momentary action of grasping.

So you might ask, well, who is it that grasps? But there's no answer to that question. There is no one behind the grasping. Grasping is just this process of fixating and clinging. There's nothing else there. There's no one there, but it's a capacity of mind to fixate and take hold of. That action creates the sense of self. And that's the only place the sense of self comes from—it is born from this.

If you've ever watched a monkey swinging through the vines in a jungle, you'll see that what the monkey does is grab hold of one vine and swing, not letting go of that one until there's another one there that they can grab onto to go a little further. So the way the monkey moves through the jungle is by grabbing one vine after another and swinging on it.

So for most of us, until we're trained, we live in that same way—always grasping something, never letting go of one thing until we have something new to take hold of and build the self around.

So where is there any freedom in this? Is there any freedom, or is this inevitable—this grasping and being born and dying and suffering? Which is another way of asking: can this chain be broken somewhere? When you look at dependent origination, one link leads to the next, to the next, to the next, and they all lead to suffering. So can the chain be broken somewhere?

Classically, the way that breaking is understood is between feeling and craving. We've talked about this—that when a pleasant experience comes up, but you don't fall into greed around it, there's peace. When an unpleasant experience comes up and you don't fall into aversion or hatred, there's peace. We've talked about bringing acceptance, bringing openness to a pain in the knee or a difficult emotion, or letting the beautiful state of metta live and breathe without trying to fixate or hold on.

This is really the heart of dependent origination in terms of our own experience. Can we bring acceptance around that element of feeling tone—to allow the unpleasant, allow the pleasant, allow the neutral—and not get carried away in reactivity? If we can, then the chain doesn't lead to craving, clinging, birth, and suffering. If the feeling tone exists but we don't develop craving around it, the rest of the chain doesn't continue.

So this is the classical place to find some degree of freedom. One teacher said, "The whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving." It breaks the cycle of conditioned arising leading to suffering—resting in the gap between feeling and craving.

Now, in terms of vocabulary, this might sound like there's a time gap between feeling and craving—that you must be able to find a few seconds there to discover and come to equilibrium in. But it's very quick. To say it more exactly, it's becoming aware of feeling and not generating cravings. That lack of reactivity opens up some space, which might be felt as a gap. But very often, the feeling is there in one moment and the craving is there the next, and there's no experience of a gap. That's okay—it's been happening for a long time this way. It can happen a few cycles more.

But if there's a feeling and you don't respond with craving, what does that feel like? What is it like when there's a pain in the knee but you're not strongly averse to it? What is it like when there's a pleasant sit and you're not holding on to it? There's some kind of peace in that, isn't there? You can feel it. We hear it from you in the interviews—you're already reporting that.

We could call it peace, ease, calm, non-reactive, equanimous, balanced, steady, stable. The word I want to use tonight for that place is *free*. We're not confined. We're not limited. We're not taking birth at that time. As you explore this, I invite you to tune into the quality of freedom in that. The heart isn't being burdened with reactivity at that time. We're not out of touch—we can still see all the elements of our experience. That's not a problem. But by not reacting, we're finding some degree of peace or freedom.

So this degree of peace or freedom that we're coming into—is it constructed? Is it something we brought about by a lot of doing? Did we create that peace through effort in the moment? Or did it come when we stopped doing? If we stop craving, is that peace there?

Yes.

So this is an important thing to check out—we don't have to manufacture peace.

We just have to stop disturbing it with craving, with greed, aversion, and delusion.

So this is one of the pointings of dependent arising: that when we acknowledge feeling and we don't move into craving, there's a natural kind of intrinsic peace that's there in the mind. It doesn't disconnect from the things that are coming and going. It doesn't disconnect from contact. But we find a different relationship to it.

The things that are coming and going—they're all conditioned. But in this kind of peace, we're finding something that's not so conditioned. It's not so constructed by our effort. It's kind of like it's always there if we let it be. That "always there" quality points to something less conditioned, less subject to arising and passing, less formed by changing causes and conditions.

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

"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 clearly."

Finding this space where feeling has arisen but craving hasn't arisen is the ability to rest, is the ability to discover peace, and there's the taste of the Dhamma in this. We're not taking birth, we're not turning into some new form of I, new form of self.

The Buddha wandered around northern India for forty-five years after his awakening, teaching. The dominant religious strain in northern India at that time was Brahmanism, which was generally a fairly wealthy ecclesiastical class who had a bit of a lock on recognized religion of the time. They had many rituals and chants and sacred texts that they based their faith and understanding on.

The Buddha was one of these wanderers outside the established religious system, questioning, looking at things in different ways, taking fresh viewpoints and practicing meditation. So it's interesting—sometimes he would go into these villages, being an outsider, just a wanderer, and come up against these established Brahmins. Some of them would really resent his presence because he was kind of a challenge to the orthodox order. But then there are these very sweet encounters where some of the Brahmins are genuinely interested in what he has to say.

There's this one section in the texts where a group of young Brahmin men come up and ask the Buddha questions. It's kind of touching because they're stepping outside their own tradition and really inquiring in a fresh way. Here's one of these questions from a Brahmin youth who asks the Buddha: "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?"

Wouldn't you have liked to ask the Buddha this question? What is liberation like for one who is freed?

And the Buddha replies: "That sage is without desire. They have nothing. They are unentangled in becoming."

So this "becoming" is another image for the construction of a self—how we become the hungry yogi or the concentrated yogi or the lonely yogi or the partner or the daughter or the father, whatever. We become all these different things through our own construction. This word "becoming" is quite central to the generation of self in these teachings.

This again is Ajahn Chah. You can imagine him delivering this talk in an outdoor Thai hall, a sala, because

the weather is quite comfortable. They don't need walls and windows and heat. Many of the outdoor halls are just a floor and pillars around the outside supporting a roof, but the whole thing is open air. So he would often speak in these open-air halls.

This talk was probably delivered in a place like that. He's addressing the people who are listening, 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."

Nibbana, you might know, is the fruition of the path—the end of suffering. Nibbana is this empty space where there's no becoming, where there is no taking a stand. Resting in the gap between feeling and craving is resting in that empty space where there's no becoming. And to put it bluntly, nibbana is that space.

Now, he's using the term nibbana a little bit loosely here. So someone from an orthodox Theravadan tradition would say this is heresy—this is not the proper use of the term. But in the Thai forest tradition, you hear this kind of language. So we're going to say that it's not the final nibbana or the ultimate nibbana, but it is a taste of nibbana. This peace that we experience when we don't fall into craving is a taste of liberation, a taste of the ultimate peace.

This is sometimes also called the deathless. Why is it deathless? Because it's not come from taking birth. It's not come from something constructed, because everything constructed will pass away. But this space comes not from doing or creating—it comes from not doing. When we stop disturbing, that space is already there.

So through this ability to rest in this gap, we start to get a little bit of a preview of freedom, or we could say a little taste of freedom here and now. In a way, this can become a kind of fruition or goal. We're reaching our goal here and now, and we may reach it many times in a day. And so to start to recognize when these moments come where greed, aversion, and delusion aren't arising, where craving isn't arising, and feel into the quality of that space—feel into the peace or ease or freedom or openness.

One of the other things you'll discover is that this peace is also where the beautiful states of mind come through quite easily. When we rest in that peace, the heart isn't so burdened and then it's easy to move into loving kindness, compassion, forgiveness, joy, contentment, happiness. So start to investigate—feel into the quality of heart and mind when the reactivity isn't forming as a new kind of self. And then that can be the scent that we follow to the fullness of freedom.

This little taste of freedom is a little bit of the goal, but it's also a path. If you rest in that state and you get to know it, that peace, it is onward leading. It keeps leading to more and deeper experiences of that peace and ease and freedom. So it's a little bit like—we were talking about this at tea time—being near a bread

factory. You know how great it is to drive near a factory where they're making bread because the smell is like nothing else? So you get a whiff of that and you may be a couple of blocks away and you don't know exactly where it is, but if you keep following the direction where the smell gets stronger, you get to the factory.

So this little whiff of freedom—if we keep following it, let that be the scent of freedom, and we keep following that, it leads us to the fullness of freedom. So we trust in that.

We're not cut off from anything. Contact is happening, we're open, we're knowing, we're aware, but we're free in relationship to everything that's happening. The six sense doors are alive, awake, rich, but we're not caught up in them.

This is from Ajahn Jumnien and another teacher in the Thai forest tradition. The best way to develop a great awareness—and the term he was using here was maha sati. Maha means great, sati means mindfulness. The 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 nature of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless.

So see what happens when you rest your attention in that open space. Let it fill that space in between feeling and craving and see what that's like. The awareness is there and full. Phenomena are still coming and going, but we're not caught. So what is the quality of the mind at that point? And could the quality of the mind itself be where our attention lands?

So far we've been emphasizing using breath, body, sounds to anchor. But as our meditation develops and there's more stability, sometimes for people an interest develops in what's the quality of mind that is aware? What's the quality of mind that is knowing? So there's this kind of natural shift that can happen away from just objects to the knowing itself. And this is a little where Upasaka Kee is pointing with that phrase of unentangled knowing.

This is Upasaka 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.

So basically she's saying, is the mind resting and knowing its own clear nature, or is it going out and trying to take hold of objects? If it's taking hold of objects, troubles will arise.

This is the way Ajahn Chah described the same exact kind of practice. 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, 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 terminate.

Just look right here, he pointed to his heart, at Central Station. Greed arises here. Anger arises here. Delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch as all these things arise. Practice right here because right here is where you're stuck. Right here is where the conditioned arises and right here is where the Dhamma will arise.

It takes a little stability to be with the heart and its movements in that way. So there's one practice I want to recommend as a way in to this way of looking. It's a practice that is taught by Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who we've mentioned before. Someone mentioned that he asked these three questions: Are you aware? What are you aware of? And what's your relationship to it?

So this third question, he expands in more detail by asking three more questions. To check on the movement of the heart in any moment, you can ask yourself: is greed present? Is aversion present? Is delusion present? And if it is, just pay attention to that experience of greed, of aversion, or delusion.

Now that's sometimes not so easy to see. So you can refine the question. How do you know if greed is present? You ask yourself, am I wanting something else to happen? It does arise like that, doesn't it? We want our experience to be another way.

Is aversion present? You can ask the question, am I wanting something to stop happening? That happens a lot too, doesn't it? The knee pain, the difficult mind state, the restlessness, the boredom.

Or to see if delusion is present, you can ask the question, am I not in touch with what's happening? Usually once we ask that question, we're back in touch. So the answer usually once we ask is no.

But this is a way you can check in any moment. Is there greed? Am I wanting something else to happen? Is there aversion? Am I wanting something to stop happening? Is there delusion? Am I not in touch with what's happening?

You can ask these three questions several times during a sitting. As you get comfortable with looking that way—we call this checking the attitude—you can ask more often. And as you get really comfortable, you can make checking the attitude your primary practice.

Let your attention rest in the heart where Ajahn Chah is pointing, where all the trains come from, and just see if there's a movement into greed or aversion or delusion. Recognize each of them as they happen. And when we're aware in this way, we can stay very centered and very alert to the movements of the heart.

The mind that's aware in this way, this is Upasaka Ki again, the mind that's aware in this way doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. That means out toward objects. 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 the flavor of this practice is when the attention is somewhat steady, we bring it to bear on our own heart and the movements of our own heart. And we just start to look: am I heading off toward wanting?

Am I heading off toward disliking? Am I heading off to spacing out? And if we are, we just become mindful of that. And that mindfulness starts to bring the attention back into the center, back into this balanced, peaceful ease of non-reactivity. And that can be our primary way of looking, our primary meditation focus.

I'll close with one more quote from one of these Brahmin youths. This is in the same section where the other Brahmin youth was talking to the Buddha. This is a Brahmin youth named Kappa who asked the Buddha: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger"—it's just an image for the realm of samsara, of birth and death—"overwhelmed with aging and death, tell us the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replies: "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. There is no other. That is Nirvana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death.

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