Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:50

We've talked quite a bit so far in this retreat about how the sense of self gets constructed and the ways that this binds us, limits us, and ties us into suffering. We've also started to talk a little bit about the way out of that. Bhante's talk the other night on the Third Noble Truth was a very clear and complete description of that possibility as described by the Buddha.

So in the talk this evening, I want to focus on both these aspects. Andrea described the construction of the self in some detail with dependent origination. Bhante described the undoing of that with his talk on the Third Noble Truth. I want to draw on both those themes this evening, really to point us even further in the direction of discovering freedom.

I think this word freedom is a very powerful concept for us. Across the world, it evokes a very deep yearning in the human heart. We see it applied inwardly through spiritual life and the teachings of the Buddha. We see it applied outwardly through so many movements for justice and equality and an end to oppression.

Looking at the inner and outer expressions of this search for freedom, a couple of things strike me. One, they both tend to be struggles. As you're discovering here, the inner journey is not always easy because we're coming up against these inner forces. As anyone finds who carries on this work outwardly, there are forces there that oppose us also. When we look closely, they're basically the same forces. So whether we're working outwardly or we're working inwardly, we're confronted by the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. That's the work that we're trying to undo in the world and in ourselves.

One thing I find really interesting is that those people who try to change the world and are most effective seem to do it by recognizing the unity of the outer work and the inner work. I'm thinking of people like Dr. King and his work in the civil rights movement, of Aung San Suu Kyi, who's a very strong meditator in her work inside Burma. I think of Nelson Mandela, whose spirituality was forged through those many years of prison. And I think about Cesar Chavez, who formed the United Farm Workers Union in California in the 1960s and worked really very successfully to bring some basic rights to seasonal workers on the farms through strikes and the unity among his community.

Chavez was also very deeply rooted in spirituality. He was a devout Catholic, and he often used masses and prayer meetings to build a sense of community and really solidarity among his workers. I think his commitment to nonviolence also came from his deep faith in the teachings of Jesus.

These are some of the most effective leaders in the outer world that we've seen in our lifetimes, and I

think that it's very significant—that marriage of the inner and outer in all those cases.

Here we're primarily involved in the inner work, and I think this question of freedom is equally important to us as an inward journey as it is in an outer form. One of the things I want to ask about this quality of inner freedom is: where is it, and will you know it when you find it? I think we may not, which is why I raised the question. I think sometimes it's staring us in the face and we may be overlooking it.

So I want to tease out a little bit of that in the talk tonight. How can we recognize it when it comes? Because if we think that freedom is only found in the complete ending of greed, aversion, delusion, that might not happen tonight. That part is a long piece of work, a long struggle. But perhaps there's a way that we can experience freedom in our practice here and now, and in doing that, come to taste some of the fruit in an immediate sense. If we can, I think that can build a lot of confidence that we're gaining the fruit of the practice, which the Buddha pointed to, as we go, as we journey.

The subject of the talk tonight is unentangled knowing. This is a term from a Thai teacher named Upasika Kee. She was a laywoman who taught from the 1950s up until her death in 1978. She used this term, unentangled knowing, which I think is a great pointing.

This word is a little tricky, perhaps, if you're not a native English speaker. Tangle refers to the twisting of balls of yarn when cats play with them or someone's long hair when they go for a ride in a convertible—the knots and snarls that happen when different strands come together. Entangle is the verb meaning to make that happen. And the "un" in front of it means we're not allowing that to happen. So we're not allowing the tangle to form.

This image of the tangle occurs in the Buddhist teachings a lot. I'll just mention a couple from the suttas. Here's one from the Anguttara Nikaya: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." I like this quote because it points to the way that different desires conflict with each other. When we try to follow them both, we get tangled up. A simple example: we want to be liked and we want to do our own thing.

What do we do when those conflict? Ah, we're caught. We're in a conflict.

This is a lovely quote. It comes from the Samyutta Nikaya and was used as the beginning of the Visuddhimagga, that sixth-century commentary on meditation practices. It's a quote of a questioner coming to the Buddha in his lifetime, addressing him by his family name, which many people did if they weren't disciples—Gotama.

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

It's a great question, isn't it? Today as much as back then.

The Buddha's answer was basically: who succeeds in disentangling the tangle is one who follows virtue,

meditation, and wisdom. That is developing the Eightfold Path, which is what we're doing here.

This is how Upasika Kee used it. She was pointing to, in this quote, "an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." An inward staying, unentangled knowing. And we'll talk more about what that means.

But first a word about Upasika Kee. Women teachers in our tradition in Asia are somewhat rare, so she stands out as being, I think, an exceptional woman teacher in our lifetime. She was also a laywoman, so she wasn't even an ordained nun but taught as a laywoman. The term upasika means a woman lay supporter.

Her talks were recorded sometime during her teaching career, and a number of the best ones were assembled into a book by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. I highly recommend the book. It's called Pure and Simple. I'll write that and her name up on the board after the talk. I find her teachings very accessible and also very deep. She does not pull her punches and gives the straight Dhamma in a very clear and, for me, impactful way. Thanissaro Bhikkhu considers her the greatest woman teacher in Thailand in the 20th century.

So this phrase, "unentangled knowing," is pointing to a kind of mindfulness that is aware of all the phenomena of the momentary experience but is not caught up in holding on, in clinging, in being enmeshed or attached with any of them. There's this sense of full presence, full mindfulness, lots of things happening, all six senses open, but not the tangle of craving and reactivity going on.

I want to suggest that this is actually happening for you at many moments throughout the day. But those moments may be quiet and a little bit subtle and go by often unseen. So in outlining this approach, I want to encourage us all to start to notice those moments, because as we notice them, they will grow and become an important part of our path.

In looking at how we become unentangled, we're first going to take a little review look at how we become entangled. Again, I want to use the model of dependent origination and refer to Andrea's talk from the other night. She explained how the Buddha's teaching is described in these twelve links, which begin with ignorance, go through momentary sense experience, and come around again to suffering, which tends to strengthen the ignorance and sets us on the cycle again.

In terms of our experience as meditators, I think the most important four links are the ones that happen toward the center of the chain. Andrea described these in detail, and I just want to review them briefly: contact, feeling, craving, and clinging.

We're going to leave out the first five links, which tend to get a little philosophical. We're going to leave out the last three links, which also get a little philosophical and get us into those nasty rebirth questions. We're just going to focus on the moment-to-moment experience of these four central links in the chain.

As you know, our basic experience as human beings is that we're constantly subject to sense experience at the six sense doors. This is what's known as contact. This is the impinging, which we feel every waking moment, of sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. These are happening all the time, whether we want them or not.

Have you ever found a way to turn these off? When you want to go to bed at night and you want things to be peaceful, can you turn off this flow of contact? When you're sitting in the meditation hall and you're searching for some calm, can you turn off contact? Generally not.

As long as we're awake, the six senses are active, functioning, and we're getting stimulated by this flow, which, as we've said many times, is difficult because it's a mix of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither. And it's this mix that can keep us off balance.

From this contact through the six sense doors, feeling arises—feeling tone arises. This is the quality of vedana, which may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feeling tone is conditioned and therefore somewhat malleable, but we can't exactly choose it either.

Based on our conditioning, we tend to interpret contact in certain prescribed ways. This provides that mix of pleasant and unpleasant in our moment-to-moment experience. These sense contacts and feelings then tend to condition the next step in the chain, which is craving. Remember, these are not strictly causal, but they are conditioning factors.

So craving is the unexamined response to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. We respond to the pleasant in a conditioned way with wanting. We respond to the unpleasant with disliking or aversion. We respond to the neutral with delusion. The neutral is not very interesting because we're focusing on what we can get or push away. So the neutral doesn't really register on our scale, and that's the activity of delusion. And delusion also reinforces greed and aversion because if we could see what we were doing, we could see it doesn't really work. But delusion covers up the activity of wanting and disliking so we don't tend to see the effect until we start to pay attention.

So craving starts to incline the attention toward an object that's experienced as pleasant. Let's take pleasant or unpleasant because they're easier. It starts to incline the mind toward that. There's a seductive quality to both the pleasant and the unpleasant. One we want to grab, the other we want to push away. And then as the mind continues to incline toward that arising, it more or less matures in one more step, which is clinging, and that is to say that we take a hold of that object.

So the Pali word is upādāna. Sometimes we translate it as grasping, sometimes as clinging. It's the same meaning. We often will use grasping for the act of taking hold, and we'll use clinging when it continues over some time, but it's the same word in Pali. Another way to think of it is we fixate on that with our attention. We do it with both greed and aversion. Obviously we do it with greed in order to draw the object closer, but before we can push an object away, we also have to take a hold of it. So if aversion is the

driving force, grasping also takes place.

Simple example: pain arises in the knee. It's felt as unpleasant. The mind inclines, perhaps out of some fear or disliking. And in order to do something with it, we have to fasten the attention there. Driven by aversion, it is a form of grasping.

Then, once we have grasped, we tend to build a self around that thing. Why? Because the mind is fascinated with it, and it means something to me, either gratification or threat. So once we've grasped, thoughts tend to proliferate around our relationship to the thing. So a lot of I-thoughts come in around the things that we've taken a hold of. So this arising of all the I-thoughts born of clinging is what we might refer to as becoming or birth, but it's kind of inevitable once we've gone into clinging.

So this is a brief recap of these four links of contact, feeling, craving, and clinging that we tend to go through until we start paying attention and seeing them. These links happen very, very fast, as I think Andrea mentioned the other night. It's not like we have a contact and then we have a few seconds to contemplate it. The contact comes, the feeling comes almost immediately with it, and then the craving will happen very fast on the basis of the feeling, and then the clinging happens almost necessarily out of the craving. There will be some taking a hold. And all these things happen in less than a second, most likely. If mindfulness is not strong, these things just tend to happen.

So you can see that over the course of a whole life, we've gone through this cycle so many times with so many objects because life is basically about forming relationships to the things that come into our field. So as an infant, one begins to relate to mother, breast, food, father, and growing up, friends, school, homework, high school, attractive people, college, sex, job, career, salary, money, Lady Gaga, Facebook, Twitter, Barack Obama, the global economic crisis. It all lands. It all lands, and we've got to relate to all of it with its mix of pleasure and displeasure.

So anytime we take hold in that mix, suffering is inevitable. Again, just a couple of quick examples. Andrea went through one, and I'll go through another. First, an example based on not liking. Let's say you're on eight precepts. Actually, it is based on liking.

Let's say you're on eight precepts. You come down at five o'clock, planning to have your nice glass of juice and a little hard candy. So you walk by that table and get the glass of juice. But as you're standing there, you notice these wonderful aromas wafting up from the other table, where people who haven't taken the eight precepts are gathering. There's a warm pot of soup and some freshly baked bread.

As you're getting your little glass of juice, you're smelling these things. You happen to be quite hungry because you didn't quite take enough at lunch to carry you through until the next morning. And you start thinking, "I would really like some of that bread and soup. Could I come back later and get some? Oh no, everybody's seen me with my glass of juice. They know I'm an eight precept yogi. I can't do that. Maybe I can sneak in after they've all gone. No, no, the food people take that away too quickly. What can I do? Did I

save anything in the fridge from yesterday? Maybe I can go get that, but people will see me eating that too. Oh, and I'm so hungry. I'm not going to get anything until tomorrow morning. I shouldn't have gone on eight precepts in the first place."

As you know, we can spin out about food and eating for quite a while. So, having taken hold of this situation, we might be born into this new birth as the hungry yogi. The hungry yogi can wander off after that little glass of juice and think and think and feel and feel about this for quite a while—could be half an hour, could be an hour. We're sort of caught in this not knowing what to do, not really liking what we've chosen, wishing that we could find a way out. And the hungry yogi has that lifespan. It's not a pleasant birth.

But eventually, let's say you come in for the 6:15 sitting. You settle in, you let go of that. And at some point you will let go of that engagement, that entanglement, and you return to mindfulness in the present moment. At that point we can say the hungry yogi has passed away. That birth has come to an end. The hungry yogi has died.

So here we had a birth that was not too happy. The hungry yogi was not a happy rebirth. But then the death was quite pleasant—happy to let that existence go and move back into good yogi here and now.

So then the good yogi keeps meditating. Mindfulness strengthens, attention settles, concentration develops. Maybe it's the next morning and we've actually had something to eat. But we're sitting, we're feeling quite present, quite steady in our mindfulness, and we like it.

So we realize, "Oh, this is that factor of concentration they were talking about. This is the quality of calm and equanimity. I can sit here. I can be effortlessly with the present moment. Thoughts are going by, but they just don't disturb me. I can be in the middle of my life. I can even think about my relationship and my work, and they just go by."

"Wow, wait till I take this back into the world. I am going to be such a cooled-out person now that I've finally found how to meditate. I'm going to be able to go back into my office and operate from this place of wisdom and compassion with everybody I meet. I know I'm going to get promoted because there are very few people who can do this. And then I'm going to have a much better salary and I'll be able to actually buy a house in this area, which I could never dream about before. And I'll be so warm and loving in a relationship. I know I'm going to find a great partner because I can hold this meditation space."

Now, I know this sounds really naive to those of you who've been sitting all this time, but when I first came upon this space in practice, I really thought it was going to last. I thought I'd discovered what all the books were pointing to, and now I was just going to live in it. So I took hold of it and really thought about it a lot for about an hour. Then I went out and walked, and then I had to come back in and sit again. After all that thinking, I was totally worn out, and the next sitting was a wreck.

So in my case, I'd taken birth as the good yogi, the concentrated yogi, and it was a really delightful birth,

imagining all the things that were going to come into my life based on my great spiritual advanced development. It was like a heaven realm birth, really. For that period of time, it was like I was floating. I was imagining my life unfolding in all these great ways, being born in a heaven realm.

But then when I came in and sat again and it all went away, oh, the death was so painful. Letting go of that was really awful. I'd worked so hard to get it. I tried really hard to get it back and couldn't. Very painful.

So if we take hold of something where there's suffering, we have an unhappy birth, but a pleasant death. If we take hold of something that's pleasant, we have a pleasant birth, but because it will change, we have a painful death. Either way, in grasping, we're going to end up in suffering, which is what the chain of dependent origination points to.

This is how we take birth. We take birth by grasping. There's really nothing more to it than that. That's what creates the sense of self over and over and over again. There's no self who does the grasping, but grasping is a function of the mind, and when we do it, we take a new birth. Some of them are brief, some of them are longer, but they're all formed from grasping.

Andrew Olendzki, who's the scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, put it very nicely in this way: "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 created by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds onto or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

So grasping gives rise to a new self, or we could call it a new birth. This is the way that our untrained mind works most of the time if we're not paying attention.

I don't know if you ever watched a monkey go through the forest overhead. When I lived in Thailand, my hut was out in the middle of a rainforest and monkeys were often passing overhead. They can travel on the canopy of trees, of course, but if they're lower down, the way they travel is by holding onto a vine and swinging until they can find another vine. Only when they see another vine coming into view will they release the first one and grab the next. Then they'll swing on that vine until they see another vine, release the first one and grab the next one.

This is the way the untrained mind usually works. It goes from one form of grasping and won't let go until it finds another. So this is what's referred to as the monkey mind—grasping more or less continuously, moment after moment.

But as meditators, we have another choice. The chain of dependent origination is not deterministic. There is freedom to be found within it. So where for us can that freedom be found? Where can this connected chain be broken so that it doesn't lead to suffering?

I would say that the classical answer is between feeling and craving. When a feeling arises that is pleasant

and we don't respond with greed, when a feeling arises that is unpleasant and we don't respond with aversion, when a feeling arises that is neutral and we don't respond with delusion, we have essentially cut that chain right there. Having cut the chain, the other links do not unfold into clinging, becoming, birth, and so forth.

Now of course it takes mindfulness to be able to do this, but I know you all are doing this because we hear it in interviews. This is one of the purposes of strengthening mindfulness—to be able to stop this chain from happening again.

This is a quote from one Buddhist teacher: "The whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving."

Now, I just want to clarify—this is a very profound and significant pointing, but don't think of this as a time gap, as though contact arises and you've got a couple of seconds to figure that one out, and then feeling arises and you've got a couple of seconds to figure that one out. Because contact, feeling, craving, clinging can happen in the blink of an eye. So there's not a time gap between feeling and craving. Don't go looking for one—you'll become very frustrated.

But what the teacher is pointing to is a state of mindfulness where one is aware of the feeling and not falling into the reactive formation of craving. That creates a space in the mind, and that's the kind of gap that is being pointed to here.

This becomes very interesting to investigate—what is that like when a feeling, let's say pleasant or unpleasant because they're easier to see, is there but there's no reactive formation?

What's that like? Look in your own experience and see what language works for you.

I would describe it in a few different ways. There's ease, it's spacious, it's restful, it's peaceful. It's not conflicted, not characterized by struggle, and there's some feeling of lightness. Those are some of the words that come to me. And particularly the word that I want to emphasize this evening is that there's freedom in that moment—because the mind is not being caught in greed, in aversion, or in delusion. That is a kind of freedom.

So essentially what's happening is there's a gap in the causal chain. In that gap, there's a sense that one touches something else—peace, ease, calm, whatever you want to call it. One of the things I want to ask is: let's call it peace. Did you construct that peace? By refraining from greed, aversion, delusion, did you construct or fabricate that peace? Or is that peace a natural part of the mind that's always available if we don't disturb it with greed, aversion, delusion?

I want to suggest that that peace is a natural part of the mind—or our experience, or whatever you want to call it—and that it's not something that we've put together by a lot of hard effort at that point. So what that can give us is a sense of trust that if we don't get involved in these reactive formations, that peace is

always available. And that peace being always available points to something that is not so conditioned—not so subject to causes and conditions. Because it's always there as a potential for us to relax into.

So we are starting to intuit, or one could say touch, the realm of the unconditioned, which is what Bhante was pointing to in his talk the other night.

I want to read this quote from Ajahn Chah. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate around these things, dividing them into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself.

The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

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

So when we rest in that gap, we are stepping out of the cycle of birth and death. We are not moving forward into grasping and taking a new birth. And because we're not taking a new birth, we're not subject to the death of that self. So not being involved in the cycle of birth and death means that we're opening to something that has the flavor of the deathless, or the unborn, or the unconditioned.

In the time of the Buddha, the dominant religion in the society was Brahmanism, and it was led by the caste of Brahmins who controlled access to the teachings and the rites and the rituals that characterized those teachings. The Buddha was an outsider to that system. He didn't come from the Brahmin caste, and what he was teaching was not derived from Brahmin doctrines. So he was always regarded with a little bit of suspicion by the religious orthodoxy of the day. He was a little bit of an outsider.

Nonetheless, when he would come and teach in villages because his reputation had spread, very often the Brahmins would come down and listen to him, which was a gesture of some humility on their part. And so there are a few suttas in a book called the Sutta Nipata, where these young Brahmins come and question the Buddha. And you can feel the sincerity and open-mindedness of these young men who are not entirely caught in the orthodoxy of their doctrine.

So this one Brahmin youth, whose name is Todeia, comes to the Buddha and asks this question: "For one

who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What's liberation like? Tell me.

And so the Buddha replies, "That sage is without desire. They have nothing. They are unentangled in becoming." Resting in the gap between feeling and craving means that one does not get entangled in becoming. One does not take a new identity, a new birth.

Here's Ajahn Chah again. Imagine that this is being given by Ajahn Chah in an open air hall in Thailand.

Imagine that you're sitting in one of these open-air halls where the warm evening air flows freely through the space. Ajahn Chah looks around 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. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness."

Where there's no becoming, Ajahn Chah is pointing out, is like nibbana—this empty space where we haven't taken birth, where we're resting in this natural peace that wasn't constructed and has the flavor of the unconditioned. This is a deathless place because no self is being born and no self is dying away from it. And it's always available.

In fact, I think we all touch it many times during the day. Ajahn Buddhadasa, another great Thai teacher, said that if you didn't touch that many times in a day, you'd go kind of mad, because the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are so upsetting.

This kind of non-becoming that Ajahn Chah referred to as nibbana is not the final nibbana—the state of being of one who is fully enlightened and has completely exhausted greed, aversion, and delusion. It's not that fullness of nibbana, but it's like a foretaste.

I was very happy the other night when Bhante used a quotation from the suttas, which he referred to as a momentary nibbana. I was familiar with this term from the Thai tradition, but I had not known where it was found in the suttas. He kindly provided me the reference. In the suttas, it's described as tadanga nibbuto, which means basically this approximation of nibbana—this quenching or blowing out of the fire to the extent possible.

This is what's happening in our practice when we come upon these periods of calm between feeling and craving. We are touching into the semblance of nibbana to the extent possible for us here and now. This is the extent to which we can realize that ultimate peace in this moment, and we can start to recognize this.

That recognition is important for a couple of reasons. One is that it's very satisfying when we learn to discover it and rest in it for longer periods. It brings some sense of the fruit of the path. When we can start to recognize that this sense of peace is in some way linked to, related to the unconditioned—which is the final fruit of the Eightfold Path—we start to realize that we are getting there. So we gain confidence.

The other reason it's important is that it becomes something of a path in and of itself. This resting in that

gap, that open space, can be seen as the path. This ability to rest there in that peace is onward leading. Not only does it have the quality of the goal, it also has the quality of the path. So in discovering it, we find that the path and the goal are coming together—that where we want to go is to some extent revealed here and now, and by touching it again and again and again, that becomes the momentum of the path.

We are still aware. We are resting, but we've not closed off our senses. The six senses are alive and functioning. We're in touch with phenomena. We have not withdrawn from the world, but there is this sense of peace in which we learn to have more and more trust.

This is from Ajahn Joon, another teacher in the Thai tradition: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—the term being translated as "great awareness" is maha sati—"is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in that 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."

One of my teachers in Thailand was Ajahn Buddhadasa. I practiced with him when I was a monk—a young monk and a fairly young practitioner. He was very accessible at that time. He was one of the great teachers in Thailand, a great meditator and also a scholar. He gave addresses on radio and television. But to some extent, he was an iconoclast, a little outside the Theravadan orthodoxy. I think because of that, his monastery had not quite been discovered yet. So when I was there, he was very accessible.

He'd have his breakfast in the morning and then often come out to sit outside his cottage on a stone bench, on bare earth with forest chickens running around and picking at scraps in the dirt, temple dogs either lying at his feet or prowling nearby. I swear they had an appetite for Westerners—Thai monks would pass by without the dogs responding much, but when a Western monk walked past, they would tend to rise up and start barking.

I would sometimes go visit with Ajahn Buddhadasa at the front of the monastery in this very informal setting. You'd simply sit on the ground before him, and he was just there, available to answer questions. But I found him intimidating at first. You know how when you meet with a Vipassana teacher, they'll pull out a chair, offer you tissues, ask if you need tea—we try to be friendly in our interviews. Ajahn Buddhadasa dwelt in this place of unentangled knowing. I can see now that he was simply resting in that space of great peaceful mind, and I was just another object arising in his visual field. That's how he related to me—he would just sit back and meditate me.

At first I thought he didn't want me there. If he wanted me here, wouldn't he be more friendly? But as I reflected later, I came to realize that he didn't mind if I sat there asking questions. He was just as content with that as hanging out with the chickens and dogs—I had at least that status. But his apparent lack of communication unnerved me, so I didn't visit as often as I could have. Later, after leaving the monastery, I deeply regretted not taking greater advantage of that opportunity.

This is that space of unentangled knowing—where we are fully present, open, balanced, aware of everything happening, but not clinging to any of it.

One approach I found helpful for entering this space was shifting emphasis slightly from the objects of the senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions—to the knowing quality of mind itself. As we've discussed, there's consciousness or knowing accompanying every sense object that arises. When a sound occurs, there's not only the sound itself, which we've become quite familiar with, but also your consciousness receiving and holding that sound. This is what it means to be sentient. If a corpse lay here beside this bell, the sound would not arise for it, but it arises for us because we have consciousness.

In our experience, we can emphasize either the object or the knowing—the consciousness that knows the object. At a certain point in meditation, when I had thoroughly investigated the objects of my six senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and all the emotions I could find—I became interested in this quality of knowing itself.

What I discovered was that moving attention from objects to knowing created a profound sense of spaciousness. It led directly into this quality of unentangling from objects. By taking that step into consciousness, I was releasing the tendency to fixate on arising phenomena.

It's not possible to create a very clear, simple meditation instruction from this. If this description doesn't resonate with you, don't worry—mindfulness practice based on knowing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and emotions is liberating in itself. It takes one all the way. This shift isn't necessary, but I share it because some practitioners like myself have found it helpful for moving beyond clinging.

I invite you to explore it through a couple of simple approaches. One is a teaching we've received from Sayadaw U Tejaniya called "Checking the Attitude." His instruction is to examine how you're relating to objects in your meditation experience—the phenomena that arise, your sense experiences—and discover whether you're reacting with greed, aversion, or delusion.

He suggests three simple questions. To check for greed, ask: "Am I wanting something else to happen?" Sometimes this is immediately clear—you can see you're wanting something different to occur, indicating greed at work. To check for aversion, ask: "Am I wanting something to stop happening?" Again, this is often quite apparent. To check for delusion, ask: "Am I not aware of what's happening?" Usually by the time you pose this third question, you're back in touch with present moment awareness.

And so if delusion was there a moment before, it's not now. But often you can identify greed and aversion by asking these questions. Then if you see that there's greed or aversion or delusion in the mind, just become aware of that. Become mindful of that.

You don't need to judge it. You don't need to judge yourself for having it. You don't need to try to push it away because that would just be an additional reaction of aversion. You just become simply mindful and allow that formation of mind.

In the beginning, if you're interested in this practice, you could do this checking like three, four, five times during every sitting or every walking. As you get more familiar with it, you can check more often. Eventually, I developed the ability to just turn and say, "What's the attitude?" And I wouldn't have to ask the questions. I could just see if there was greed, aversion, or delusion. So it made it very easy to check. I could check more often.

Then, if you like, when you're very comfortable with this checking, this can become your primary meditation focus. This can become your primary practice. You just keep your mind on: Are there reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion coming? If there are, you're mindful of it. If there are not, you just rest.

This ties in really nicely with another teaching of Ajahn Chah, which I'd like to read: "If you want to see a train, just go to the central station. You don't have to go traveling all the way up the northern line, the southern line, the eastern line, and the western line to see all the trains. If you want to see trains—every single one of them—you'd be better off waiting at Grand Central Station. That's where they all terminate. Just look right here." He points to his heart. "Just look right here 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, where conventions arise, and right here is where the Dhamma will arise."

So this is a very interesting and wonderful way to practice, which is that when the mind is stable, we just take the movements of the heart—greed, aversion, delusion—as what we're paying attention to. And if you want, you can rest your attention in the heart center and just notice those movements of reactivity.

This is Upasaka Ki again: "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."

And by the way, when she says "going out," it also includes events in the body, like going out to body sensations or to pleasant sensations. That's moving away from the central awareness of the mind.

So this is one way of getting in touch with the quality of unentangled knowing. We're just paying attention to the movements of the heart toward greed, aversion, or delusion, and resting when they're not active.

Another way is to directly turn the attention toward consciousness itself. Again, learning to look at this knowing side of experience can be a way of unhooking from the fixation on objects, on sense contact.

I was standing at the pond the other day—the large pond down the road—and it was raining. I was watching the raindrops just land on the surface of the pond. You know how it happens: each one makes a little splash and makes a few ripples. If they're coming often, the ripples start to intersect with each other, but they're all just arising and passing, arising and passing. They make that little impact on the surface of

the lake.

For me, what that was like was that consciousness was like the surface of the lake, and all the sense objects make this momentary ripple. But I can turn my noticing to the field of knowing and then feel the ripples, but I don't get so involved in each ripple. I get more involved in knowing that field in which the consciousness is taking place of the changing phenomena. You can practice with this.

How do we become aware of awareness itself, or how do we become conscious of consciousness itself?

One way—this doesn't work for everybody—involves working with the sense of sight. Usually, the eyes are looking outward, focusing on objects that are out there. What happens if the vision were to turn back and look at the source of seeing? Would that put you in touch with this quality of consciousness itself?

Another thing that's helpful for people sometimes is just the phrase, "aware of awareness," or "turn the attention to the knowing." If any of these resonate, you can play with that.

This is 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. An inward staying, unentangled knowing.

We're with the awareness or we're with the consciousness itself, and we don't latch on to the sense experiences that are arising at the six sense doors. When you practice in this way, the field of consciousness gives a great sense of space in which everything is just allowed to arise and pass.

You may know that when the Buddha left his home, he had a wife and a son. He left to go on his spiritual journey for six years, and his family—his father and mother and relatives—took care of his wife and son. When he returned, his son was seven years old. His son ordained as a novice and received teachings from his father, and at the age of seven became fully enlightened. That's a helpful parent.

This is one of the meditation instructions that the Buddha gave to his son, whose name was Rahula. He said, "Rahula, develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space."

I'll close tonight with another exchange between one of the Brahmin youths and the Buddha, drawn from that same section of the Sutta Nipata. This Brahmin youth's name was Kappa, and he asked the Buddha this question: "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."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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.

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