Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:18

We talked a few nights ago about how the sense of self gets created over and over again, moment by moment, through the act of identifying with one of the aggregates, taking hold of one of the aggregates and claiming it as "I" or "mine."

In the talk tonight, I want to look at this process in a little more detail and also to look at where within it we can find a sense of freedom. This concept of freedom exerts a very strong pull in the human heart. Spiritual paths are directed to it, and outer work is directed to it. In the spiritual path, we come to find that it means freeing the heart from the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. And in the outer work, we find actually it's the same forces that need to be transformed in order to find great freedom in our societies, in our world.

I find it interesting that some of the most effective leaders in creating outer change have been those who've been able to combine the spiritual inner work with the political outer work of moving to freedom. We think a lot about leaders like Martin Luther King and Aung San Suu Kyi. Someone we don't mention as often or maybe think of as often is Cesar Chavez, who was the leader of migrant farm workers in the 1960s who formed the United Farm Workers Union and brought decent basic rights to farm workers throughout the state of California and the West Coast. Something interesting about him that I didn't know at the time is that his activism was grounded in his devout Catholicism. He used prayer meetings with the workers to build a sense of community and solidarity. That's how he joined people together. And his commitment—a deep commitment to nonviolence in protests which could have turned quite violent—came out of his deep faith in the teachings of Jesus.

So it's very interesting that the same forces need to be conquered inside as well as outside to bring this sense of freedom. And in both cases, there's a struggle, because these forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are very deeply conditioned in us who are on the path and in the humans who make up the society that we find ourselves in.

Coming back to the spiritual journey and the inner freedom that we're discovering here, I want to ask a couple of questions. Where is freedom to be found on our journey? Is it only at the end of the path when the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion have been totally uprooted from the heart? Is that the first time we're going to have a sense of freedom? Or is it possible to have a sense of freedom along the way before that? And if it is, will you know it when it comes? Do we know enough to recognize the freedom that we might touch before we get to that final freedom?

The subject of the talk this evening is unentangled knowing. This term "unentangled" may be a little

difficult if you're not a native English speaker. Tangle refers to the way that lines of things get twisted, like if a kitten is playing with a ball of yarn, the yarn gets all knotted up and snarled, or the way that if you have long hair and you go for a ride in a convertible, it's hard to comb out afterwards because it's gone into all kinds of tangles. So "entangle" is the verb that describes forming a tangle, and "unentangled" means that we're going to prevent the tangling from happening. This is a kind of knowing that prevents tangling from happening—that's unentangled knowing.

This was a term used by a great teacher in Thailand in the last century named Upasika Ki, one of the foremost women teachers. I'll say a little about her in a few minutes.

The Buddha referred often to this concept of tangle as part of our life, as part of spiritual practice. Here's one quotation from the Anguttara Nikaya: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." I like this reference to how craving or desire puts us in all sorts of tangles within ourselves. You can see how this happens because our desires sometimes run counter to each other. Just a simple example: we may want to be liked—that's one desire. We want other people to like us. But we also want to do exactly what we want to do, and nothing else. Sometimes those two don't go together so well, and that creates conflicting desires or a tangle.

Here's another great quotation, this one from the Samyutta Nikaya. This is a questioner who's coming up to the Buddha and addressing him by his family name. The name of his family was Gotama—he was Siddhartha Gotama. So people often referred to him by the family name 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, acknowledging the inner conflict, the outer conflict. Who succeeds in disentangling?

The Buddha said it's one who develops the Eightfold Path—one who cultivates virtue, concentration, and wisdom—who disentangles this tangle. This quotation, by the way, is so central in the history of Buddhism that it forms the introduction to the Visuddhimagga, the sixth-century manual from Sri Lanka that compiles the meditation techniques of that time.

Upasīkā Kee was a noted teacher in Thailand, remarkable first because she was a woman. This was quite radical, since most teachers in Thailand had been men, and mostly monks. Not only was she a woman, she was also a laywoman who remained in lay clothes throughout her life and never took formal ordination.

She started very simply with a piece of family land in the Thai countryside. There she had some meditation huts constructed, went into retreat, and when others joined her, they all practiced together while she taught. Her teachings span from about the 1950s to her death in 1978. Fortunately, some of her talks were recorded, transcribed, and then translated. The best of these have been compiled into a beautiful book translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu called *Pure and Simple*—highly recommended.

This is a quotation from her book:

An inward staying, unentangled knowing.
All outward turning, cast aside.

This points to a form of mindfulness that doesn't get caught up with the objects of our experience through the force of craving or through greed, hatred, and delusion. It's an awareness of our experience that remains free from reactive formations.

What I want to suggest is that moments of this unentangled knowing are happening for you many times during the day, but you may not recognize them yet. In this evening's talk, I want to show you how to begin recognizing when those moments are happening, to feel what that feels like, and to appreciate the freedom—the degree of freedom that may already be here. Then I want to discuss a couple of approaches to meditation that make this more accessible.

But before we get into that, I want to understand in more detail how we become entangled. How do we get caught in the factors of our sense experience?

The Buddha described this generation of suffering in detail in a teaching called Dependent Origination, which traces twelve links—causal links within our experience that start with ignorance, progress through ten other links, and culminate in suffering. It's considered perhaps his most profound teaching, his deepest insight.

I'm not going to discuss the entire teaching tonight since we have a different focus, but because it explains entanglement in such clear detail, I'll examine the central four links of that sequence. The first five links venture into somewhat philosophical territory we don't need to explore. The last three links also get philosophical and lead into that challenging question of rebirth—which we'll stir up in a few more sessions, but not tonight.

So, returning to our basic experience as human beings: What is it to be human? Remember that discourse on totality where the Buddha explained that there are only ever six things happening—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mind objects. That's all that's ever going on, experienced through their corresponding sense organs. These are the facts of our experience as people.

This impingement from the sense doors on our experience is known as contact—sense contact. There are six types. This is the first of the Dependent Origination links I want to examine.

Contact includes our becoming conscious of the sense experience that has occurred. It's the meeting of the sense door, sense consciousness, and sense object. When you hear a sound, that's contact. The sound is present, your ear is functioning, and hearing arises as a result. That's a moment of contact at the ear door, happening constantly.

Each contact, as you know, carries an associated feeling tone—the vedanā quality—which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. These contacts, with their varying feeling tones, arrive in our consciousness

moment after moment after moment, and we have no control over the pleasantness of the experience.

We want it all to be pleasant all the time, don't we? Who has ever wanted an unpleasant sense contact? Yet we have no control. The body gives us pain, thoughts bring worry, emotions cause us to suffer and contract, and sense input varies dramatically. This is our basic situation, and this is precisely why being a sentient being is problematic.

We want things to be pleasant, but we can't control that. So contact gives rise to feeling, and this is the second link in dependent origination that we're investigating tonight.

I think we've talked quite a bit about how when there's pleasant feeling, there's a habit, a conditioned habit for us to react with desire or greed. When there's an unpleasant feeling, there's a conditioned habit for us to react with aversion. And when there's a neutral feeling, there's a conditioned habit for us to overlook it with delusion.

These reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion are collectively known as craving. You probably know this is the origin of suffering in the Four Noble Truths—it's the second noble truth. The craving is the source of suffering. So this is a powerful force to become aware of.

Now the word craving indicates a desire force. But aversion also comes under craving. Why is that? Because craving is basically wanting things to be different than they are. This is how we get into conflict with the present moment. The present moment arrives with its varying sense contacts, but we don't always like it just that way. We want more of this and less of that.

So wanting it to be different—if there's craving, we want more of the pleasant. If there's aversion, we want to push away the unpleasant. Both of these are part of the force of craving.

Now, how does delusion get wrapped into craving? That seems odd because delusion is kind of neutral. It's just a spacing out quality. The way I understand it is twofold.

One is when we're preoccupied with gaining the pleasant and pushing away the unpleasant, anything neutral doesn't excite us. And you can feel this as you're sitting. The antennae are up in a vigilant way: what's going to threaten me? And I'm going to push that away as quickly as I can. What's going to gratify me? And I'm going to pull that to me as quickly as I can. Sometimes the more intense, the better, right? Because we find a strong identity in relating to what's intense. Anything better than that neutral, boring blandness of neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling tone.

So delusion is born out of a mind that is craving the pleasant and wanting to push away the unpleasant because the neutral doesn't hold stimulation. So we just ignore it. We overlook it. Whereas in fact, the neutral is as much a part of our experience as pleasant or unpleasant. So we should be as much in touch with it. But if craving is operating, we're not. It looks uninteresting.

So craving includes greed, aversion, and delusion. The other reason it includes delusion is that we don't

see clearly the activity of greed and aversion. Because if we did, we would see they weren't satisfying. So when delusion starts to tune in to the activities of greed and aversion, we tend to give them up. For greed and aversion to be operative, we have to keep ignoring the suffering of those activities. So delusion is always paired with greed and aversion.

This is the third link in the chain. Contact leads to feeling. Feeling often leads to craving—the reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The last of the four links we're exploring is clinging or grasping. Very quickly, I would say pretty automatically, craving goes into grasping. The way I understand it is like this: We're meditating, we're paying attention to the details of our experience. We see something that has the opportunity either to draw us or repulse us. And the attention inclines that way because we're picking up on its pleasant or unpleasant vibe. It's like that pleasant or unpleasant stimulus draws the attention there.

And if it's at all strong, the next thing that happens is we glom onto it. In order to pull toward us the pleasant, we have to first take hold of it. In order to push away the unpleasant, we first have to take hold of it.

You can feel this in your practice. If there's a pleasant sensation in the body, notice how the attention is drawn there and it fixates on it. Fixation is the sign of grasping, the sign of taking hold. If there's an unpleasant sensation, the attention fixates on that in order to solve it. I can either push it away, or I can manipulate the energy with mindful attention, or I can do something to try to break it up and make the unpleasantness go away.

So very quickly from craving, the mind moves into grasping. The Pali word for this is upadana. Sometimes we translate it as grasping, sometimes as clinging. It's the same word in Pali. The way I think of it is that grasping is the first act of reaching out and taking hold. As we continue to hold on to it—because we usually do—then it becomes clinging. So first we grasp and then we cling, but in Pali, it's the same word.

Because there's no self in this whole process, no real self in this process, the question "who grasps?" isn't answerable. Grasping happens. It's a faculty of the mind to fixate and take hold. So there's no one doing the grasping, but grasping happens. Then we develop an "I" and "my" around it because we get fascinated with it.

You can notice this. With anything you take hold of, the self is going to build around that with words of "I" and "my." We'll dwell on it with our thoughts and think about it with "I" and "my." Check it out and see if this is not true.

All this happens really quickly. These four links—contact, feeling, craving, clinging—can happen within a second. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And we're there. So it's a very quick process and it's not so easy to see the individual pieces, but by paying attention again and again, you'll pick up different ones at different points and you can see how they fit together.

So in life, how does this work? Life is basically about making relationships. That's what human experience is about. We come out of the womb, we pop into the world. There's mother, breast, food, father, school, sports, high school, sex, college, job, money, taxes, Lady Gaga, Instagram, Twitter, Barack Obama, global economic crisis—it's all flying by. Some of it's pleasant, some of it's not. But who's going to resist taking hold of that juicy mix of stuff? Right? We do. We take hold of it all as it flies by.

If we take hold, suffering is inevitable. Greater or lesser, suffering follows from taking hold. Because when we grasp, we form an "I"—we in a way give birth to a self. And then that self lives a life, maybe brief, maybe longer, and then it passes away. So in that process of being born as a new self and then living and then passing away, there's some suffering, maybe small, maybe big.

Let's look at some examples. You know, this is such a simple environment, and yet there are so many things that can frustrate us on retreat. How many things in a day can you get irritated about? That's a lot, isn't it? There's nobody cutting you off on the freeway. There's nobody pulling into a parking place ahead of you. But so many things can come up. There's noise in the dorms. There's noise in the halls. Teacher says something that you just don't agree with. The interviews are running late and you're having to wait outside.

The food is not what we want this particular day. The team we're doing work meditation with is moving too fast or too slow or they're not doing their jobs. The mind is restless. We want to take a walk, but it's raining outside. Somebody has gone through the line and taken too much food and there's not going to be enough for us. All these things we can find ourselves getting irritated about.

And sometimes that irritation can last a while. We find ourselves still going an hour later about something that happened earlier in the day, here in such a simple life. It can happen like that. So something comes along, we take hold of the situation, we think it shouldn't have been like that, and we get annoyed. This irritation can go on for a while. We're taking birth as the irritated yogi.

Then we'll dwell on that thing. How could they do that? I can't believe—the rules are posted. People have said it so many times. They're not supposed to be doing that. Should be more considerate of others. On and on for quite a while. So we've taken birth as the irritated yogi. And this is not a pleasant birth, because irritation is not that much fun. I mean, we enjoy parts of it, or we wouldn't do it. But when you look at the direct experience, it's really not that pleasant.

Eventually, we let go of that flare-up, and we come back into some kind of balance. This balance, Upasaka Ki calls the natural mind. We return to our natural mind. And then that birth is over.

That's one kind of birth. Here's another kind of birth.

We come into the hall. We've been practicing quite steadily. Things have been up and down. We come into the hall. We sit. All of a sudden, we're really present. We're connecting well, one moment after another without much forcing. The object is clear. The mind is steady. Our confidence is high. Thoughts go

through, but they don't grab us. Some emotions may come, but they're seen and pass out again. As we continue to practice, we start feeling concentrated. The mind feels stable and strong and really centered. We're able to pay attention moment after moment for a while.

When I first hit this point in meditation, I thought, "Wow, I've solved it." I started thinking, "I'm going to go back after the retreat to my life and it's always going to be like this now." I thought it was linear like that. "I'll go to work and I'm going to be able to deal with people from this place of centeredness and strength and steadiness. I'm going to get promoted because of that, because not many people can do that. Then I'll get more money and I can buy a house." And relationships—I thought, "Wow, people are going to want to be in relationship with me because I'm going to be so cooled out. Nothing can bother me."

I actually thought like that for a while. So I got up from the sitting and went out to walk. I thought, "I'm going to take this thing for a walk." I just kept thinking about how much fun it was going to be for the rest of my life because I was going to be living like this. I got spun out in all these pleasant fantasies.

I can't wait to get back in the hall and sit again. I came back in the hall and sat. Oh, I was totally stirred up. That thought stream had just become a whirlwind that took me over. The concentration was gone, my energy was all over the place, my body was in contraction, and I was miserable.

So I had taken birth by grabbing onto the concentration and claiming it as mine, building up a lot of fantasy about it. It seems really naive now. This was my first experience and I was very naive. I'd taken birth as the concentrated yogi, the good yogi—claimed it, fantasized about it, and then it crumbled. It went away, as all those states do. It died.

So eventually, I let go of that stirred-upness. I let go of being the good yogi, and my mind returned to balance again. Natural mind returned. The good yogi had to die, and he did die. So we've had two births and two deaths.

In the first case, the irritated yogi—the birth was unpleasant. That's a suffering state to be angry. But the death was a happy one because that being passed away. Unhappy birth, happy death.

But in the second one, the birth at first was happy. Good yogi. That's like living in a heaven realm—to think we're always going to live like this. A little deluded, but kind of heaven realm place. And then the death was really painful when that good yogi went away. First one, painful birth, happy death. Second one, happy birth, painful death.

It's always like that. If we grab hold of the pleasant, it's pleasant at first, but we suffer when it goes. If we grab hold of the painful, it's painful immediately, and then there's some release when it goes. So either way we grasp it, pleasant or unpleasant, there's going to be suffering. Taking birth involves suffering, one way or another, due to the fact of change.

This taking hold of is the act of grasping. It's just a faculty of mind. There's no one who does it. But once

the grasping happens, self builds on top of that. It builds on top of what has been fixated on by claiming it in some way as I or mine.

This is expressed beautifully by Andrew Olenski, a Pali scholar: "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 on to or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

So this grasping is the source of selfing. And it comes out of a sequence—it always comes out of a sequence. Contact, feeling, craving, clinging or grasping, whichever you like. This is the heart of dependent origination. And this sequence always leads to suffering.

If you look at our typical conditioned approach to life, whether it's in retreat or outside, it reminds me of the monkeys I used to see in the forest. When I lived in Thailand, I had a hut out in the rainforest, out in the middle of this large forest. A lot of monkeys would go by overhead in the trees. Often they would travel through the canopy at the very top, but sometimes they would come lower down and swing from one tree to another using vines that hung down.

What the monkey would do is grab hold of a vine and swing until they got close enough to grab another vine. Only then would they let go of the first and jump over to get the second. Then they'd swing from that vine over to another, and they'd only let go of it when they saw a third vine that they could grab hold of.

This is why we refer to these restless movements of clinging as monkey mind. Because a monkey won't let go of one thing until there's another one to take hold of. And that's the way so often we're conditioned to live in the world—we don't let go until there's something else to grasp.

But as meditators, you have another choice. You have the choice of letting go and not picking up anything new. And maybe this is where freedom lies—in letting go and not picking up.

So let's explore this. We've traced the chain: contact, feeling, craving, clinging. Is this inevitable? Because clinging always leads to suffering. If this is inevitable, we're doomed, aren't we? As long as there's contact, it's going to lead to suffering. Could this be accurate? Or is it possible to interrupt this chain at some point, and if so, where?

Let me ask: have you ever been with an unpleasant feeling and not moved into aversion? Have you ever been with a pleasant feeling and not moved into greed? Have you ever been with a neutral feeling and not moved into delusion?

That's the power of mindfulness. Mindfulness gives us the ability to feel the pleasant, the unpleasant, and the neutral and not move into a reactive formation. That's a great skill, and that is where the chain can be broken.

Classically, this is the understanding with dependent origination. The chain is broken between feeling and

craving. What it means is that a feeling comes, but we don't react with greed, aversion, or delusion. If we don't do that, then there's basically an approach of acceptance. We've allowed, accepted, opened to—whatever you want to call it—relaxed into that feeling, and no self is being born and no suffering has to take place from it.

This is what gets us off the wheel of dependent origination where ignorance usually leads to suffering. This is how it gets interrupted, and this is the opening to freedom. One teacher put it like this: "The whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving."

This is significant. The whole of the path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving.

When we talk about a gap here, please don't get the idea that there's a big time gap. Feeling can move into craving just like that. So it's not like contact comes along and you have a couple of seconds to contemplate that, and then feeling pops out and you have a couple of seconds to contemplate that and decide whether you really want to go into craving or not. And then craving arises and you have a couple of seconds to figure out if you want to go into clinging or not. No—it's like boom, boom, boom, boom.

So there's no time gap really between feeling and craving. The reaction or lack of reaction is pretty instantaneous. If mindfulness is there, there doesn't have to be a reaction. And then that space can go on for a while. That's what feels like a gap. The feeling is there, but there's no reaction. Then there's this space that opens up in the mind.

So this is what's so interesting to explore: when it's like that, when there's not the reaction of greed, aversion, and delusion, what does that feel like? Explore this in moment-to-moment experience. What does that feel like?

When I look at my own experience, the way it comes across to me is spacious, ease, peace, non-conflicted, no struggle, and a feeling of lightness in the experience. Not heavy. It's not weighed down. It's not burdened. So the main word I want to put in here is: it feels free.

When we're in the gap between feeling and craving, there's a real sense of freedom at that moment. That freedom that opens up—another way to describe it is peace. There's peace of mind at that point.

Did you construct that peace?

Did you construct that freedom? Or was it just there when you didn't grab? When you didn't grab, was that just what was already there? Perhaps that peace is a natural part of the mind that's there all the time, that's always available as long as we're not grasping. And that we always have the choice to rest in it by not reacting with greed, aversion, and delusion.

If that's always available, it points to something that is maybe a little less impermanent or a little less fragile or a little less conditioned than these momentary sense contacts. It's as if there's always that potential, and then there are these conditioned things coming and going.

I want to read something 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 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 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."

When we rest in this gap, we're not taking birth. And we are said to be abiding in something that has a flavor of the deathless. It's not subject to being born and dying. It's something that's always available if we don't disturb it.

At the time of the Buddha, the predominant religion in India was Brahmanism. The Brahmins were a high social caste who more or less represented the religious orthodoxy of the day. It was founded on ancient texts and a lot of rites and rituals. The Buddha was not part of that group, of that caste in India. And once he became a wanderer, he was definitely outside the religious orthodoxy.

Yet, after he became enlightened and wandered around and showed up in various places to teach, some of the Brahmins were interested enough to come and hear him. Even though he wasn't part of their gang and he wasn't part of the orthodoxy, he had a good reputation. So they would come and lend an ear.

There are many suttas in the collection called the Sutta Nipāta where these young Brahmins are coming to ask questions of the Buddha. I find it a very beautiful part of the suttas because they have to be quite humble to leave their own orthodoxy and caste to come and ask questions of this poor mendicant wanderer. So there are some very nice dialogues between them.

In one such dialogue, a Brahmin youth named Todeyya has come to ask a question. Todeyya says, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What's it like in there? What is the liberated mind?

This is the Buddha's response: "That sage is without desire. They have nothing. They are unentangled in becoming." Unentangled in becoming means they're not taking part in this momentary birth and death anymore.

This is again from Ajahn Chah. You can just imagine Ajahn Chah giving this teaching in a hall in Thailand

that's basically outdoors. There are so many halls in Thailand where the weather is quite warm, which have a floor—usually a concrete floor—and a roof that's supported by pillars that go around the outside with no walls. So it's completely open air. It's a place, a sala, where many Dhamma talks are given in Thailand.

Ajahn Chah, you could imagine, was giving a talk in a setting like this. And this is what 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 nibbāna is this emptiness."

So nibbana, the freedom that the Buddha was pointing to, is in this place where there is no becoming, where there is no birth or death.

When we rest in that gap, we are in that state temporarily. It's not the final nibbana. It's not the final liberation. But you could say it's like a little foretaste of it, of the peace of nibbana. An approximation of nibbana, as it's called in one sutta.

Explore this and see what it feels like. It's not overwhelming. It's not overwhelmingly pleasant. But there is a peace in it that's very satisfying. And the more you rest in that peace and allow it to deepen, the more satisfying it becomes.

So that satisfaction brings a sense of the fruit of the path. You're finding the fruit of the path, the sense of freedom as you go. We might say that the goal of the path is felt here before we reach the final end. We're feeling the goal as we go.

But also resting in this place is the path. As that teacher said, the path is resting in this gap. That means it's onward leading. So in this approach, we're resting and we're allowing ourselves to settle, and that continues to deepen and incline toward the final liberation. The path and the goal have become basically the same. Where do we want to go? Peace. How do we get there? Peace. We rest in this peace, allow it to deepen, and it leads in only one direction. And that is that final or ultimate peace of nibbana.

We're still aware. When you rest in that gap, it's not like you close off the sense doors. Not at all. Quite alert. Present. Sense contact is still happening at all the doors. So you're in touch with the world. You're not withdrawn. But you're meeting it all from a different place.

This is from Ajahn Jemnian, who's another master in the Thai forest tradition. "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the words he used for this were maha sati. Maha means big, sati is mindfulness. And by the way, he gave this little talk here at Spirit Rock to a group of Spirit Rock teachers, 1997. "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 their nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their

nature of impermanence, and this other is the Dharma of the deathless."

So you'll find this way of looking a lot in the Thai forest tradition.

One of my teachers in Thailand was Ajahn Buddhadasa, great teacher in the last half of the 20th century, one of the greatest Thai monks. He was both a deep practitioner and a scholar of the texts. He combined them to teach and comment on ways of practice. When I was with him, he was very well known in the country. He gave radio addresses throughout the nation on Sunday mornings. But his monastery was not a big scene at that time, and it meant that he was very accessible.

In later years, he became more famous, and big tour buses would pull up to the monastery, and hundreds of tourists would come out and visit, and it kind of got overrun. But when I was there, it was still pretty low-key.

So every morning after his morning meal, he would go out and sit on a bench in front of his cottage, his kuti. It was at the front of the monastery. It was a stone bench just set on a big patch of earth, of dirt. And around him, forest chickens would be walking by and just pecking at things that were on the ground. The temple dogs would be lying around. And generally, if Thai people went by, the temple dogs wouldn't move. But somehow, if a Western monk went by, they'd sit up and bark at us.

Always seemed to happen. But nonetheless, he was completely accessible—just sitting there on his bench. You could approach him at any time. I would go up, make my bows before him, sit on the ground, and ask him any dharma questions I wanted. He would simply sit and answer.

But I have to say, at the time I found him rather intimidating because he was such a great teacher. Even then, he was well-known, and his demeanor was not overtly warm and welcoming. When you visit a vipassana teacher, they typically say, "Oh, pull up a chair! Do you need tissues? Can I get you some water? Come on in and sit down"—trying to be friendly and accommodating.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was not quite like that. He simply was himself, just sitting there. I felt put off because I thought perhaps he didn't want me there, which was a little unnerving. I held back from visiting him more than I wish I had in retrospect.

Because as I reflect on it now, what I realize is that he was simply abiding in unentangled knowing. I was just another object arising and passing at his sense door within his meditation. He didn't care whether I was there or not. He would have been equally content for me to sit down and ask questions for a while—it didn't disturb him at all. He would have been equally content if I had gotten up and returned to my kuti. He was simply resting in this balanced knowing, meditating me as I appeared in his awareness.

But I didn't feel that welcoming energy, so I remained somewhat hesitant to approach him.

What we want to discover is a way to move into this space of unentangled knowing, where we can open to all the arisings at the sense doors without getting caught in them, without grasping.

In our meditation instructions here, we've progressed from focusing on objects one by one—body, breath, sounds—to this choiceless attention that opens to all of them. Now we want to take one more shift within this open attention, moving into unentangled knowing.

This is not a technique per se. Unentangled knowing is a frame of mind, a state of mind free from grasping. But I want to discuss a couple of approaches that can help us move in that direction together. It involves taking a step back from objects into other facets of mind.

Let me mention two approaches tonight. The first is a practice from Sayadaw U Tejaniya that we've discussed several times, which we call "checking the attitude." As you relate to the events in your experience, you periodically check to see whether greed, aversion, or delusion is involved in your relationship—how you're relating to them. You'll notice this is the same point of examining the presence or absence of craving that we explored in dependent origination. It's the same central juncture.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends checking for greed by asking, "Am I wanting something to happen?" Take a look and see what emerges. To check for aversion, ask, "Am I wanting something to stop happening?" To examine delusion, ask, "Am I not in touch with what's happening?"

If you find any of these three present, you don't judge it or try to push it away—that would be another form of grasping. You simply become mindful of it. "Okay, greed is here now. Greed feels like this." Just become aware of it. "Aversion feels like this. I'm knowing aversion."

I think you'll find that when you ask these questions, it creates space around the direct experience of whatever sense contact is occurring. It's almost as if you step back and observe in a witnessing way: "How am I relating?" This creates spaciousness in the mind that can open up the gap between feeling and reactivity. You begin to look at the reactive formations of mind as a central focus of meditation.

As you develop this practice, you might check your attitude two, three, or four times during a sitting or walking period. As you become more familiar with it, you won't need to ask the three separate questions. You can simply inquire, "What's the attitude?" and it will become clear because you've practiced with it sufficiently.

Once it becomes clear that you can just look and see if there's greed, aversion, or delusion, you can make this more of a primary practice, meaning you can rest your attention and just notice any disturbance of greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is another quote from Ajahn Chah. "If you want to see a train, just go to the central station." So here a train is a symbol for a movement of mind. Just go to the Central Station. You don't have to go traveling all the way up the Northern Line, the Southern Line, Eastern Line, Western Line. 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," and 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, where conventions arise, and right here is where the Dhamma will arise."

So we simply settle into the heart and we feel any reactive formation of greed, aversion, or delusion. All the trains leave central station right there, and we can become mindful of that. This stops us from getting on board the train and riding it all the way out one line.

This is from Upasaka Ki: "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. Is the mind being affected by the objects of sensory contact? Are we getting entangled with greed, aversion, and delusion? Or are we not? Keep checking on that. Don't send the mind out latching onto things."

This is the same message. So this is the first approach: checking the attitude, resting in the heart center, looking for the movement of greed, aversion, delusion.

The second approach is to turn to the dimension of consciousness or awareness rather than the experience of the sense object. You know how every moment of sense contact has both the object and the knowing of it? Object and knowing together. Turn to the knowing instead of focusing on the object.

So we're going to do a guided meditation tomorrow morning—I'll warn you now in case you want to skip it—that will give clear instruction for how to move to being in touch with this knowing. But for tonight, I'll just give some suggestions.

I was outside not long ago and I was standing by a pond, and it was raining. So I was looking at the surface of the pond as the raindrops were falling. It wasn't a heavy rain. It was kind of a light rain. And if you've ever done that, you know that you can see the impact of each raindrop on the surface of the pond. It goes "blip," and it makes a few ripples. And then another goes "blip," and it makes a few ripples. And then the ripples run into each other, and the drops are falling close to each other. And you get this beautiful moving pattern of water and wave and raindrops coming in.

And it struck me that that surface of the pond was kind of like a sensitive membrane, a sensitive plane that's like our consciousness, right? And the raindrops are like sense contact. So we're sitting here and moment after moment, there's just this little bit, bit, bit from sense contact. But the surface of the lake is like our consciousness. These contacts are landing in, let's say, the field of awareness moment after moment after moment. And if we're sensitive, we can feel each little blip.

Can we keep our attention on the big open plane—say, of the surface of the pond—the big open plane of our awareness, where we'll feel the little blips of the drops, but we don't get obsessed with each drop or

any drop? We let the sense contact come and go. We don't fixate on any of the individual drops that are landing in the consciousness.

So what happens when you do this—you'll practice with it tomorrow—is it's as though we find a dimension within ourselves that's a step less entangled or less enmeshed with the objects of the senses. And this is a beautiful place to meditate from. We're clearly in touch with what's happening. We know the impermanent nature of the sense objects as they're landing moment by moment, but we don't fixate on the raindrops.

We keep our attention in this broad plane of knowing.

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. This is the meditation that we want to develop.

We can stabilize our attention on this plane of awareness. We stay in touch with the phenomena that are coming and going, but we don't get enmeshed with grasping at them.

So I'll close with a quote, again from the Sutta Nipāta, one of these other Brahmin youths who has come to talk to the Buddha and ask questions. This is the youth named Kappa: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

The flood is a very frequent reference in the old texts to the storms of birth and death that we are all vulnerable to. And the island is—where do I step out of the floods to find safety? "Tell me the island, dear sir."

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

So let's just sit together for a moment, please.

[Period of silence]

In the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir. Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is Nirvana.

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