Transcendent Paticcasamuppāda

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:55

The subject of tonight's talk is transcendent dependent origination. This may sound like a mouthful, but breaking it down, it's actually not that complicated. Transcendent simply means "goes beyond." Dependent means one thing arises based on another, and origination refers to how things come to be.

The Buddha spoke extensively about dependent origination, and I want to begin with the general principle he stated many times: "When this exists, that comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the ceasing of this, that ceases."

This is a principle of mutual dependency, and you can see its application in the Four Noble Truths, which concern suffering and its cause, the end of suffering and its cause. This principle has very broad applicability. At one point, the Buddha is said to have declared that one who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma, and one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination. That's how fundamental it is to his teaching—everything arises based on something else.

You probably also know that this general formulation is used in a specific case to indicate a chain of twelve links which begin with ignorance and proceed through related links to craving and clinging, ending in suffering. This is essentially a very detailed description of how suffering comes to be. The undoing of suffering, the Buddha said, comes with the undoing of ignorance. When ignorance ceases, all the other links collapse and no suffering arises. This is the second most famous expression of dependent origination.

But the chain we're exploring tonight consists of twelve other links. This is called the transcendent chain because it transcends suffering, but in a different way. In the original dependent origination, suffering is removed by removing ignorance. But this chain traces the development of the path to the end of suffering in positive terms, which I find quite remarkable.

This teaching is taken from a discourse in the Samyutta Nikāya called the "Discourse on Proximate Cause." In it, the Buddha states the typical chain leading from ignorance to suffering, and then presents this other chain which starts from suffering and proceeds through liberation. This chain picks up where the more common traditional chain leaves off, tracing the journey as a comprehensive overview of the spiritual path in positive terms. I find it deeply inspiring to examine these steps, beginning with suffering and leading to liberation.

Let me state this chain of transcendent dependent origination in its twelve links: suffering, faith, gladness, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowing and seeing things as they are, disenchantment,

dispassion, liberation, and knowledge of the extinction of the taints. That final link—knowing the taints have been extinguished—represents the end of the path.

Let's trace how this unfolds. The first connected links show that suffering can give rise to faith. This is a truly interesting connection, where the chain departs from the original sequence and begins moving in a genuinely positive direction. Suffering, it is said, leads to faith.

This is rather a surprising connection because there's abundant suffering in the world, yet not necessarily abundant faith. So how is it that for each of you, suffering transformed into faith? This requires a very unusual turning.

I invite you to examine your own journey and see if there isn't some truth to the fact that you embarked on the path out of suffering and a desire to find resolution to that suffering. Some people may take up meditation out of intellectual curiosity, but intellectual curiosity doesn't usually sustain someone through a three-month retreat. I believe that for all of you here, there was a deeper realization of unsatisfactoriness in life—in your own personal experience—and that this unsatisfactoriness led you to seek something more. The Buddha taught that there are two kinds of search...

There's a search with wisdom and there's a search without wisdom. We see the world embarking on the search to find happiness through external means, and that doesn't lead to real happiness. But the search with wisdom leads us to examine the causes of suffering and can lead to great happiness—the Buddha said to the highest happiness.

There are two conditions for someone to turn that corner. One is the awareness of suffering in their life, the clear recognition of the difficulty and pain in their own existence. And the second is to hear the teachings, to hear teachings that can lead one out of suffering.

At some point, each of us in this room has had to become open to looking at our lives and investigating them in a new way to resolve this basic existential question of pain and sorrow. It's not always clear what will lead one person to this investigation while another remains untouched. There's something—I hesitate to say destiny—but there is something that seems fated about our journey.

A number of years ago, a friend and I were invited to teach meditation in a juvenile hall in California. For those unfamiliar with this system, juvenile hall is where young people are placed when they've been arrested and accused of a crime if they're under eighteen. These are people who are not yet adults but have been picked up for some suspicion of a serious crime.

We were brought into the maximum security part of this juvenile prison in the Bay Area, invited by people who worked there to lead a class on meditation. We were meeting with young men—it was a segregated dorm with just males in that wing—aged fifteen to seventeen who had been arrested for things like assault, assault with a deadly weapon, grand theft, murder, attempted murder, and similar charges. These were suspected crimes that, if they ended up being convicted, could put them in jail for a very long

time.

When we went in, we wanted to give them instructions first on how to calm their minds and second on how to open to the difficult emotions they were facing. You can imagine a group of young men tossed into this holding facility, awaiting trial, not knowing what direction their lives would take, dealing with huge amounts of fear and anxiety, cut off from contact with their parents, cut off from their community, their whole futures uncertain.

It was very interesting to see how much they took to the instruction. We couldn't call it Buddhist meditation—we thought that wouldn't fly. So we called it "mind power," and that they could more readily relate to. We gave them the same kinds of instructions that we've given here. We started them with the breath, and then we took them into the area of difficult emotions.

The meditation instructions on working with fear were really helpful for people. One positive aspect was that they had a lot of unscheduled time during the day, time on their own that they could use for practice. Some of them found a truly transformative relationship to the fear they were experiencing. This gave them a new way to find—I won't say ease—but some relief from the direct experience of fear.

In the end, we also decided to teach them about karma, putting it in the context of karma as the science of happiness. We taught the five precepts, and toward the end, we taught loving-kindness to them. It was reported later, after the class when other teachers took over, that some of the people had been members of gangs and they had started to send loving-kindness to people in rival gangs because they said, "Oh look, they have mothers and sisters also. We should hope for their welfare."

It was very moving that they also discovered a certain amount of faith. I can't say they kept up the practice afterwards—I don't know what happened in their future lives. But in this setting, they were highly motivated, a very highly motivated group of young men, and really found out that it could work.

At the end, we gave them a certificate for completing the course in mind power, and we signed our names to it. One of the young men asked, "Can I take this to the judge when I go up for trial?"

Something like this happens to some of us. The suffering in our life puts us into some kind of extreme situation where we feel we need to find a way through. In a way, the extremity of our suffering sometimes forces us to dig so deeply that we find this way through.

Ajahn Chah, who was one of the modern founders of a school in the Thai forest tradition, talked about his own practice as a younger monk. One of the traditional practices they were encouraged to do in the Thai forest was to go meditate at night in a charnel ground.

So you can imagine this is something that will bring up a certain amount of fear and anxiety—to sit at night in a place where dead bodies have been brought.

So Ajahn Chah was sitting there and what he didn't realize is that a corpse from a nearby village was

being brought that very day and a pyre had been built and the corpse was going to be burned. And it was right next to where he had taken his seat to go into the evening meditation.

So he didn't move. The body was placed on the pyre. It was set alight. The body was cremated and then the villagers left. So he was there all on his own at night next to the body that had just been burned. And he was sitting with his back to the fire and his eyes were closed. This was spooky. You can imagine the feeling. He was scared. He was not an enlightened master at that point. He was a young monk.

And he recounts it this way. He said, "I forgot about sleep. My eyes were rigid with fear. Then about 10 p.m., there came a sound of shuffling from the fire behind me. It walked up behind me. The leaves crunched under the footsteps as it made its way round to the front. It got closer and closer until it stopped right in front of me and just stood still."

This was really it. I forgot all about Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. There was only fear welling up inside my chest until it completely filled me.

So there he was, totally immersed and filled in this panic of fear. And then he said, "After some time, the fear reached its peak and began to overflow. A voice inside me asked, 'What am I so afraid of?' And then another voice answered, 'I'm afraid of death.' And then the first voice said, 'Where can you run to escape death? Whether you are afraid or not, there's nowhere to escape death.'"

And Ajahn Chah recounts, "As soon as I thought this, all the fear completely disappeared. It was amazing, so much fear, and it could disappear just like that. Non-fear arose in its place. Now my mind was lighter and lighter until I felt as if I was in the clouds."

This is very interesting. Sometimes the practice will take us to the edge of what we can bear. And then sometimes there's this amazing opening from, you could say, the wisdom—our inherent wisdom in our minds.

This is a story from the nuns at the time of the Buddha, a nun called Siha. And this is from a volume in the Pali Canon called the Therigatha, the verses of the elder nuns. She recounts her story in verse form:

"Obsessed by sensuality, I never got to the origin, but was agitated, my mind beyond control. I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace. Pale and thin I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night. Then I took a rope into the forest and thought, 'I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life.' I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree and put it round my neck. Just then my heart was set free."

So this is Siha's account of her own full awakening. She fully awakened at the point at which she was going to hang herself. That extremity and the proximity to death brought something else forward for her.

So you all have had your own versions of these insights, maybe not quite as dramatic. But we've all had something like this, where in a time of extremity, something else came through. And that degree of suffering and then openness becomes the basis for our faith.

So this is what convinces us that the practice actually can work, that the teachings are true. The word for faith in Pali is saddhā. And the literal meaning is to place one's heart upon. So faith in this sense is not a series of beliefs or doctrines. It's what can you put your real being and trust in? What can you place your heart upon?

And when you find that you can place your heart into these teachings, as all of you have found at many different points, that becomes verified faith. You know for yourself that the teachings work and that you have the ability to carry them out.

So this brings in aspects of faith or saddha which have to do with confidence. It's another meaning of saddha. We begin to develop the confidence that we can walk this path ourselves and we can come out of our own suffering because we've seen it happen. We also then trust—we trust in two things: we trust in our own innate wisdom to find the way, and we start to trust in the path as the way that will lead us beyond suffering. Traditionally, this is summed up as saying that one has faith—one discovers faith—in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

When one finds that faith is a part of one's life, it brings a certain gladness into the mind. When we don't know that this is possible, there's an element of anxiety in life. I look back to my early life before I found this path, and one of the things that's most alarming is the mixture of happiness and suffering and not knowing what way to go. There was a basic kind of confusion, and finding the path was a great relief to that confusion.

So the discovery of faith really leads us into a determined effort, a persevering effort on the path. In terms of the five spiritual faculties, which I think Winnie talked about earlier, faith is the first of the five. When faith grows, it leads to effort. And effort is what then carries us along the path.

In this particular sequence, faith is said to lead to the next factor, which is gladness. Sometimes translated as joy, but I'm going to use the word gladness because it's a little different than the other joy we've talked about. The Pali word is pamoja.

One of the things this highlights is there are a lot of words for joy and happiness in the Buddha's teachings. We've got a few words for dukkha—we've got dukkha, we've got the hindrances, we've got craving, we've got the kilesas, we've got the taints. But there are also a lot of words and a lot of lists for happy qualities. There's pamoja, there are other words we'll reach tonight, there are the brahmaviharas, there are the factors of enlightenment, there are the spiritual faculties. The wholesome lists are bigger than the unwholesome lists.

So we want to get really tuned into these wholesome qualities because they are really what propel us along the path. I think it was Sally who mentioned this quote from Analayo: the entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy, or you could say gladness.

So this is an important and essential part of our journey along the path. If you can find areas of joy and

gladness in your practice, they become a tremendous ally. It's necessary. We all need to find these.

One example is loving-kindness for the benefactor. When you hang out with someone that you love, that becomes a source of uplift. Another is the practice of sympathetic joy, or mudita, where we focus on the happiness of various beings that we bring to mind, and their happiness lifts our heart.

This need for an ally of joy came clear to me when I was practicing in Burma a few years ago. I was originally a monk in Thailand for a year. I really enjoyed that time. Due to circumstances, I left a little too early. I hadn't really lived out my monastic inclinations. There was always that little bit of leftover desire to be back in robes again.

Some years ago, I had a chance to do that. I went to Burma. I wanted to practice with Pauk Sayadaw, who's a great master of both concentration and vipassana. I wanted to learn his concentration practice.

So I went and he allowed me to ordain. I arrived at the monastery about 5 p.m. one day in my lay clothes and my suitcase. I asked him if I could ordain, and he said, "Yes, you'll ordain tomorrow after lunch."

I said, "Whoa, that's kind of quick. I just landed here. I don't know where anything is. I don't know how to do anything."

So in the morning I went into town and got my robes and bowl. I came back and right after lunch someone shaved my head. I went through an ordination ceremony and put on the orange robes again. It felt great to be in the orange robes, but in the meantime I'd forgotten how to tie them. As I was walking around, they kept falling off my shoulder.

I should have known what was coming, but I ordained at the beginning of the rains retreat.

You know, there's this period of three months every year in Asia where the monks and nuns go into seclusion in the monasteries because the rains are happening and you don't want to be trampling through the fields. So I should have known by its being called the rains retreat that something was about to happen.

And it did. It rained steadily for about the next three weeks. I hardly saw the sun and I think it was raining about three inches a day because it was a tropical monsoon that just kept coming down. The meditation hall was a fifteen-minute walk uphill from my kuti, and that was through the rain. There were six sittings a day up there, the shortest of which was an hour and a half, the longest of which was two hours. And the practice was very simple—just staying with the experience of the breath on the upper lip all day long, sitting, walking, nothing else. There was no choiceless attention. There was no opening to sounds to get a sense of relaxation. It was on the breath all the time, every day.

The practice was challenging. The weather was really challenging. The biggest spider I'd ever seen was building a huge web right on my porch. And the food was very simple—just one meal a day, mostly steamed vegetables and white rice. At the end of the retreat, I found out I was losing about half a pound a

day during that time.

All of this came to a head one day when I was down at the dining hall. I'd gotten my bowl filled with rice and curry, and I even had a little dessert, which I put in the bowl lid turned upside down on the top. I was holding that in one hand, and it was raining like crazy, so I had my umbrella in the other. I was walking back to my kuti, and my robe started falling off my shoulder. I was walking up this muddy path when there were a few Burmese lay people who knelt in the dirt by the side of the road to bow as I went by—that's what they do to honor monastics there. And I was trying just to keep my clothes on at that point.

I made it back to my kuti and had my meal, but these were the most challenging conditions I'd ever practiced in. The meditation was difficult. It was going okay, but it wasn't going great. So I reached a real low point in the middle of that period due to all those different conditions, and I felt I needed some support. The teacher was not psychologically trained, so I had to look for my own inner resources.

I had brought along a picture of the Dalai Lama, who's a great inspiration to me, and I turned to the picture with a real spirit of supplication. I was feeling very humble at that point. I turned to the picture and said, "Your Holiness, what advice do you have for me? I need some help right now."

It was very interesting because as soon as I said it, the voice of the Dalai Lama popped into my head with his Indian-accented English. There was a very clear transmission. The Dalai Lama said, "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." And then the transmission just ended. It came on—boom—and it was gone. That was all I was getting from His Holiness on that day.

But I thought, what a beautiful message. Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support. When would that not be helpful? I took the message in, and I really brought it to mind many times in the rest of that retreat. When I could remember what cheerful felt like, it really picked me up.

So I recommend this to you—find sources of gladness, whether they're internal or external. Another great source, of course, is nature. We're so fortunate here to have access to nature because very often we can go out, especially on a day like today, and let this incredible autumn beauty in the woods, on the trails, on the roads, around the grounds, just lift our hearts. I know a lot of you take advantage of that, and it's a wonderful resource that we have. Don't look down on beauty.

It is very, very helpful. This is from Ajahn Sumedho: "Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse." That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty. This is the joy of mudita, appreciative joy—being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us.

So don't forget opening yourself to the beauty of what's around us. Sometimes I tune into light and radiance as just a reminder of that beauty. There's something really special about the quality of radiance

in this world. And when the mind relaxes and opens to that joy, just an ordinary moment can have a tremendous amount of uplift.

This is from Thomas Merton: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being." All created being is speaking of this beauty and the gladness that it brings.

So then gladness leads to the next factor, which I'll translate here just for lack of confusion as rapture. It's the Pali word pīti, which when Bonnie talked about in the seven factors, she called joy. That's also a great translation. Just to differentiate it, I'll use the word rapture this evening.

Rapture is kind of an intensification of the gladness of pamojja. And particularly, it brings that sense of delight into the meditation itself. So the gladness may be triggered by an external reflection or contact with nature, inspiration of a person, but we bring it into our meditation and we start to find a delight in the meditation object. One teacher in Australia talks about finding a relationship to the beautiful breath. So to discover that the breath can be beautiful is a sign of that delight in the meditation itself. That's a sign of pīti.

Another synonym for pīti is rapt attention—R-A-P-T—rapt attention, because we're so enjoying what we're seeing. So this is one of the seven factors of awakening that Bonnie talked about. It's one of the five jhanic factors that Sally talked about. I won't talk a lot more about it because they covered it really beautifully. But we'll just note that it's a mental factor that is accompanied often by physical energy. So the energy connected with pīti can be felt as swelling, as trembling, as uplifting, as pervasive throughout the body. And this is generally experienced as pleasant. The quality of rapture generally has a pleasant tone, although sometimes it can be a little too strong.

But the pleasant nature of it leads into the next factor of this chain, which is tranquility. I think we may have talked about this as one of the seven factors of enlightenment, as calm. It's the same Pali word, passaddhi. So tranquility calms the energy of rapture. Sometimes rapture is felt as a little too strong, a little too turbulent, but as this moves into—mellows into—tranquility, the turbulence of the rapture settles down. Sometimes this is translated as tranquility, could be translated as calm, sometimes it's been translated as relaxation, and it's felt both in the body and in the mind. So in this the body is settling as well as the mind, and that lets us settle into the moment without either wanting something different or resisting what's there. But the tranquility is very inviting. It lets the mind really settle.

So this discovery of calm is sometimes new territory. It's something we often don't find in daily life. And so one meditator who first felt this in their practice noted it tentatively and said, "Calm? Like, unbelievable, right? Calm? Is this what they're talking about?" And so you may have that feeling. It's a little unfamiliar. But as you recognize it and trust in it, it's a beautiful quality to settle into.

It's kind of like we've crossed the stormy ocean with all the hindrances—you know, rocks and waves and

giant squids coming up—and we found a quiet harbor in the middle of this stormy ocean. And that quiet harbor is tranquility or calm.

And I love, in connection with this, this poem from Emily Dickinson. It's just an excerpt from a part of one of her poems called "Wild Nights." For those of you who don't know Emily Dickinson, she lived just about a half hour away from here in the town of Amherst, and her house is still available there to tour. From "Wild Nights":

Futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden.

Let me read that again. Futile—that means useless—futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden.

It has this feeling of just being beautifully settled in this kind of primeval terrain, peaceful and restful.

So in the factor of tranquility, the mind discovers its own natural peace and ease. There is a natural peace and ease to the mind when we don't disturb it. When the mind isn't being stirred up by random *papañca* and emotions, there is a natural peace that is there.

Ajahn Amaro, abbot of Amaravati, has this really nice meditation instruction. When you've discovered this quality, he says, rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body, and then pay attention to whatever disturbs that.

I like this: rest in the natural peace and ease. This is the territory of tranquility, of calm. And as we settle into it, it opens the doorway to a new kind of contentment because the mind has found its own peacefulness and satisfaction.

This leads to the next of the factors, which is happiness. The Pali word here is *sukha*. In this sequence of transcendent arising, this is not a terribly bubbly or exuberant kind of happiness. It's a very settled happiness. The kind of thrill of rapture has been mellowed out through the peace of tranquility and settles into this calm kind of happiness that might be better described as contentment.

As contentment starts to be felt, it really tends to do away with the longing for anything else. *Sukha* has this quality. Actually, I like the term because it sounds a lot like sugar. I've been curious if there's an etymological connection between the two. But I think of *sukha* as very much like sugar for the mind, but healthy. Maybe it's agave nectar. It brings this sweetness into the mind that also really helps to settle the body. The sweetness combined with the calm gives a very warm and stable kind of settledness.

Whereas the gladness we talked about is evoked by certain conditions—by nature, by a benefactor, by an inspiration—at this point, the *sukha* of happiness doesn't depend on conditions. It has flowered of its own. It doesn't depend on external conditions to be continued. The mind has found its own way in.

There's a sense of coming home at this point in the presence of the *sukha* and the tranquility together. It's

like we found a big piece of what we've been looking for. I think people come into meditation practice looking for peace of mind. When we find this combination of tranquility and contentment, we feel like we've discovered that.

We can't secure it as a permanent resting place. We recognize that it's still impermanent and subject to arising and passing, but at least we have opened to that possibility. We've seen that possibility as one of the outcomes of our meditation practice. We know that practice leads in this direction. We trust in this.

This kind of peace of mind is a friend and an ally that makes a lot of life much more acceptable. When we can rest in this place, it feels like we have the inner quality to deal with the ups and downs that life brings. It's almost like if that's there, everything else is workable. If that's not there, sometimes it feels like nothing else is satisfactory.

This reminds me of a poem of Rumi's. When Rumi says "you," he usually means the divine, the presence of the divine. But I think of it in terms of this beautiful kind of contentment.

Rumi said: "Come to the orchard in spring. There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers. If you do not come, these do not matter. If you do come, these do not matter."

When we have this stable contentment, the external conditions don't matter so much. We're not drawn to need things in the outside world because there's a self-sufficiency that is inward.

This stage of happiness is very pleasant in itself, but as you know, the path doesn't stop there. I think Carol mentioned this quote from the Buddha: "Two things I never lost track of in my own practice—not to be lazy in my efforts and not to settle just for wholesome states of mind."

So even this level of deep, peaceful contentment is not the end of the path. It leads on to the next link, which is concentration or *samādhi*.

Concentration is that unification of mind that Bonnie talked about, Sally talked about, the jhanic factors that make it up. And that unification of mind, bringing together all the mental energy that is in us, brings a sense of steadiness, of stability, of firmness, and of strength.

When we give away our energy to thoughts of past and future and all the emotions that come with that, we're giving away that inner strength. But when the mind collects through this contentment and relaxation, that strength is recollected. So the concentrated mind is a mind that's come together and that strength gives us more and more ability to accept all the ups and downs of life.

So this is still a deeper settling, a deeper collection than even the happiness brings. The mind just continues to collect because it's simply settling within itself, not being pulled by desires outwardly. But this is also just onward leading. As the Buddha said, the purpose and benefit of concentration is to know and see things as they really are. So concentration has its value in opening the door to insight, seeing things as they really are.

So this is the next link in transcendent dependent origination. The Pali is yatha-bhuta-jnana-dassana, knowing and seeing things as they truly are. Jnana means knowing in the sense of wisdom. It's the same root word as the Greek gnosis. Dassana means seeing, and it's the same root as the Pali vipassana. So those are based on seeing. Yathabhuta means things the way they are, or as Carol sometimes likes to say, things the way they have come to be. Both point to seeing reality in its characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

So seeing the three characteristics is an important piece of yathabhuta-jnana-dassana. Or we could say seeing the emptiness of things. What we get from this insight—the three characteristics are emptiness—is that the things of the world don't have the power to offer lasting satisfaction. Sense objects can't give ongoing satisfaction because none of them last. None of them in truth are solid enough to hang on to from the beginning. As we talked about in the emptiness of the aggregates, this insight leads to the next step, which is that we see the display of the world as a kind of magic show.

In that Sutta on the lump of foam, the Buddha talked about how consciousness reveals the world as a magic show or as a magical illusion. And when we see that way, the insubstantiality, we can't believe in it so thoroughly as capable of satisfying. This is the sense of disenchantment. Disenchantment doesn't mean depression, it doesn't mean cynicism, it doesn't mean negativity. It just means we recognize the sense objects have enchanted us for a long time. We've been drawn out of ourselves toward them thinking that they were the source of happiness. Now that enchantment, the spell that they have cast, is broken. The illusion is broken. And we see these things can't give lasting satisfaction. So we're just not that thrilled anymore.

As one teacher says, this is the stage of the withdrawal of the projected promise of pleasant sense experiences. They offer one thing, but you can't cash it in. It doesn't work that way. So with disenchantment, there is a step back from the objects of the senses. When we realize they don't have the ability to satisfy, there's a deeper letting go that starts to happen.

There was a particular period in my practice as a monk where this was the most alive thing for me. I'd been in retreat for some months at that point, fairly calm. And I just started seeing how every experience that came through didn't last very long. And a number of you have reported this in our meetings here. Pleasant things happen, unpleasant things happen, and they just all cycle through. None of them last very long. And so there's no real gratification from the pleasant and there's no real obstruction from the unpleasant.

And yet, how much do we continue to focus on the pleasant and unpleasant nature of those transitory experiences? They still have the power to captivate us, don't they? To fascinate us. We really want the pleasant and we really don't want the unpleasant. But as we see the kind of rapid cycling that is their nature, we sort of go, why am I bothering holding on or pushing away? They're going to go of their own nature anyway. Why am I bothering?

And so this leads into the next of the factors which is called dispassion. The Pali is viraga.

So I want to explain dispassion a little bit. It basically means equanimity. We're not strongly drawn to sense experiences and we're not strongly turned off. We're not much pulled one way or another.

So this is the balance that we see in the statues of the Buddha and Quan Yin, this equanimous mind state that still cares and is still compassionate. So dispassion doesn't mean that we become cold or uncaring. It doesn't mean that on the path we give up all our fire. That's not what's being pointed to here.

In classical Buddhist language, from all the traditions, this word passion has a certain meaning. It's a synonym for lust, for greed, and for craving. And so when passion is used in the Buddhist context, it's always an unwholesome state. But in the West, we use passion in a way that's often very wholesome. And we can continue to use it in that way as long as we're clear with the meaning.

In Buddhism, we have different words that refer to this kind of strong feeling. And these words are such as ardor, which is atapi, zeal, which is chanda, or enthusiasm, which is virya. And in the Satipatthana Sutta, it's said very clearly that one abides ardent and resolute, dwelling on each of the foundations of mindfulness. And in another discourse, Sariputta says, one cannot attain enlightenment without ardor.

So this is what we might call passion, this quality of ardor or atapi. Actually, the root of it was a practice of fire, fire worshiping or fire devotion in ancient Indian culture. So this is a fiery quality, this quality of ardor.

Zeal is a translation of chanda, is one of what's called the iddhipadas or a basis of power when combined with concentration. We have to have a zeal, an energy for what we're doing or it won't move forward. And virya, of course, is what we've been talking about as energy or effort, one of the seven factors and one of the ten paramis.

So these are all wholesome qualities that we could call in our Western language different forms of passion—our caring and love for and devotion to the practice. But dispassion in this sense is something different. And in its fullness, dispassion literally means the absence of lust.

And if you remember when Carol talked about Nibbana last night, she talked about it—I can't remember if this is the exact same quote, but here's a very similar quote: "Insofar as the practitioner has abandoned greed, aversion, and delusion, insofar is nibbana realizable, immediate, inviting, and attractive." In other words, when the mind is released from lust, from hatred, from confusion, it is immediately next door to nibbana, to the immediate discovery of this unconditioned element. This is the pointing of dispassion at this point. When lust has been temporarily ended, the mind is very close to the opening to nibbana. This is the precondition for the direct realization or what we call enlightenment.

So there's another discourse where the Buddha says—and as I hear it, it almost is giving meditation instructions to lead us into this realization. This comes from a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya: "This is

peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

This is like a temporal sequence of how one gets there. So peaceful and sublime—we've kind of encountered this through the maturing of sukha. The stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, and the destruction of craving—this is the deep letting go. We are not pursuing any of the objects that come to us through the contact through our senses. Craving being destroyed means greed, aversion, delusion are being destroyed. Then dispassion is the natural outcome of that movement.

So it's kind of like the Buddha is directing us how to land. He's in the air traffic controller booth and we're coming in on the runway. Still the formations. Relinquish the attachments. Destruction of craving. Now we're landing. Dispassion is what the runway looks like.

And then this final word, before nibbana: cessation. It's a really interesting word in the Buddha's vocabulary, and it's used in a number of different contexts. One of the contexts is in the Four Noble Truths. The cessation of suffering results from the cessation of craving. The word for cessation is nirodha. So tanha nirodha is the cessation of craving, and that leads directly to dukkha nirodha, the cessation of suffering. So that is being pointed to here—the end of craving, the end of suffering.

But there's another context in which nirodha is used that I find really interesting, which is the cessation of consciousness, vijnana nirodha. And specifically what's pointed to here is the cessation of the six bases of sense consciousness, the six types of sense consciousness. So the Buddha said in one discourse, that sphere should be realized where the eye ceases and the perception of forms ceases, and so on through the other six senses. That sphere should be realized where the six classes of sense contact cease.

Wow, what's that about?

So this is a very interesting investigation. What I found when I was in that period in the monastery and I was starting to lose interest in sense objects, that means I was losing interest in contact. And contact is the meeting of the object with the organ and the consciousness. I was starting to lose interest in that because it was not satisfying and it wasn't threatening. When I started to lose interest in that, I could feel the very factor of consciousness slipping away due to the lack of interest.

Why should we be so fascinated by these temporary blips that can't satisfy and can't harm us? And yet we're totally tied to them most of the time, moment after moment. Let go, let go, let go, relinquishing all attachments, even to contact. And what is discovered as one releases the attachment to even contact itself is that consciousness fades as well. And in that cessation of the sense consciousness, the door is truly opened to the realization of what transcends them—nibbana.

So this contact with nibbana is the next step in the sequence described by the term liberation. The Pali word is vimuti. So this contact with the unconditioned, if it's at a certain depth, a certain depth of realization of nibbana, is what liberates the heart and mind. And this is when the practitioner will say

something like: "Birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being." This is the fullness of liberation. The work is completed. The mind has been released from all the unwholesome factors.

What partakes of nibbana, what gets us close to this territory? There are a number of ways that we talk about it and have talked about it in this retreat that give the closest mundane descriptions of what is beyond the mundane, what is beyond worldly conditions that transcends suffering that is beyond the world. And these are concepts like acceptance, deep acceptance, full acceptance, full awareness in the present moment, steadiness of mind, stilling of all formations, equanimity, and deep trust. When these come together, we are in the mundane territory leading to that realization.

And then after liberation, it is said there's the knowledge of the destruction of the taints. One realizes that the most fundamental impurities of the heart and mind have been eliminated, have been eradicated, never to arise again. And these are the asavas, what's often translated as the taints: the taint of sense desire, the taint of becoming, and the taint of ignorance. So when these are gone, the work is done, it is said.

So when I first heard about this possibility, I got really impatient. And I went to my teacher in the next interview and I said, "But how long will it take?" Because I really wanted to get there quickly. But we don't know how long it will take. What we do know is that this practice is leading that way. The Buddha said the practice of mindfulness in the four foundations—that is right mindfulness—only leads in one direction, and that is to this full liberation. And he said we don't know how much of our fetters wear away each day, but we do know that they're wearing away.

And he compared it to an ocean-going ship that's been brought up on the land after a season out on the seas. And the sun and the wind and the climate factors just slowly erode the riggings and the ropes and the sails that are just left out in the open air. So all those things are rotting away under the influence of mindfulness. We don't know how fast, but we know that they're rotting away.

This is how Ajahn Chah put it: "The practice has to develop naturally according to conditions. You allow things to develop according to your accumulated wholesome karma and paramis. This doesn't mean you stop putting effort into the practice, but you continue with the understanding that whether you progress swiftly or slowly, it's not something you can force. It's like planting a tree—it knows by itself the appropriate pace to grow at. If you crave to get quick results, see that as delusion. Even if you want it to grow slowly, see that as delusion."

And so this also reminds us of another quotation from the Buddha, which I think somebody may have mentioned earlier, but I'll read it again.

When a deva came to the Buddha and asked, "How did you cross the flood of existence?" - meaning, how did you find security and release and safety, how did you become liberated? - the Buddha answered with

profound simplicity: "I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away."

Let's just sit for a minute with this teaching.

I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away.

This is the middle way of practice - neither forcing nor being lazy, neither grasping for quick results nor becoming complacent. Like the tree that knows its own natural pace of growth, our practice unfolds according to its own wisdom when we maintain this delicate balance of effort and patience, of engagement and letting go.

Thank you for listening.

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