Transcendent Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 54:35

The subject of tonight's talk is transcendent dependent origination. Having said that, I must admit that's the hardest part about the talk—it's all easy from here on.

First, I wanted to check in with you all as this is the last night of the retreat. Does it feel a little different than the first night of the retreat? Have you gone through some change in these seven days? Are you feeling happy? Ready to go home? A little mixed? Yes, I can see it's a little mixed.

In tonight's talk, I want to discuss the development and role of happiness and joy in the practice. One of the Buddha's most famous teachings is called Dependent Origination, in which he traces the arising of suffering based on ignorance through a chain of twelve links. At its heart lies the arising of craving and clinging as the main causative factors in suffering. This teaching shows the way to freedom by the undoing of those twelve links, beginning with the undoing of ignorance and leading to the undoing of suffering.

The teaching I want to explore this evening is another chain, also in twelve links, but one where the Buddha describes the journey to liberation in positive terms. I find this a really inspiring way to look at the practice because it frames everything in terms that I personally find truly uplifting.

This sequence is based on a discourse that appears in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Upanisa Sutta. It's sometimes called the radiant wheel because of its uplifting quality, and sometimes called the wheel of awakening. The commentaries call it transcendent because it describes the journey that transcends suffering, that overcomes suffering.

I can't resist slipping in a riddle at this point: Why did the yogi refuse novocaine? Because they wanted to transcend dental medication. Yes, it's bad—that's the low point of the talk, no more like that.

This chain begins where the other one left off. While the traditional Dependent Origination traces the journey from ignorance to suffering, this one starts at suffering and traces the journey to liberation. Let me first mention the twelve links, then we'll go through them in more detail.

It's said that suffering leads to faith, and faith leads to joy, which leads to rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowing and seeing things as they are, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation, and knowledge of the extinction of the taints. This is the sequence I'd like to explore this evening.

The first two links state that suffering is the cause for the arising of faith. This is quite surprising when you stop to think about it, because when we look out into the world, there's a lot of suffering going on, yet

not a lot of liberation happening. Somewhere this chain isn't getting completed in normal life.

Generally, suffering conditions deeper ignorance. Suffering usually causes us to respond with more craving, with more greed and aversion, and this thickens the sense of self, which prevents us from seeing the way things really are. The Buddha said that suffering has one of two outcomes: it results either in bewilderment—we could say confusion—or in search.

So here, if suffering is going to lead to faith, something is running counter to the tendencies of samsara, of the pain of cyclic existence that governs most of the world. This tradition teaches that there are two conditions for suffering to turn into faith. First, there must be an awareness that we're suffering, so that we're no longer in denial about this basic fact. Second, we must hear true teachings—teachings that truly have the power to liberate that suffering.

When I look back into my own life and the way I came into practice, I can really relate to this teaching that suffering is the cause for the arising of faith. At a certain point in my life, I went through a very unhappy period and was strongly motivated to find an answer to it. I was strongly motivated toward that search. In a way, the suffering becomes like the sand, the friction in the oyster that by rubbing over and over again creates the pearl. This is one of the ways that suffering can work in a spiritual life. We become truly open to looking at things in a new way when we're suffering, in a way that we're not when we're just gliding along complacently.

This really came home to me a few years ago when a friend and I received an invitation from the juvenile hall in San Mateo to teach meditation to a group of young people who were incarcerated there. We accepted and went into the maximum security wing of the building.

For those unfamiliar with this feature of our justice system, juvenile hall is where young people under eighteen who have been arrested for crimes are held before trial. In the maximum security wing, there were fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-old young men who had been arrested for serious offenses—murder, attempted murder, armed robbery, assault—but had not yet appeared before a judge or gone to trial.

They were locked in their cells for most of the day—probably eighteen hours—with only some common time in the shared room. You can imagine the fear and insecurity they carried about their lives. They didn't know whether, in the coming months when they went to trial, they would be imprisoned for years, perhaps for the majority of their remaining lives. Being sixteen or seventeen years old, they had no tools to cope with this situation of fear and uncertainty.

In the common room where they spent their waking hours, they were surrounded by others who had experienced difficult upbringings. The atmosphere was violent and angry—there wasn't a great deal of loving-kindness, that's for sure. Then they would return from that environment to be locked in their cells, bouncing off the walls with all the emotions, uncertainty, and insecurity churning inside them.

We came into this setting to share some meditation tools, having no idea whether they would be relevant. We knew nobody who had tried this before, and we had no inside experience of what these young people were going through. It was probably the most nervous I've ever been teaching—I had no idea if this would connect. I felt like a fool several times, but that was okay.

We thought we'd better not call it meditation, and especially not Buddhism, because that would seem too soft. These young men weren't going to show up for that kind of class. So we billed it as "mind power"—something they could relate to. "Come and get some training in mind power."

We started teaching them the same techniques we've been exploring this week: beginning with the breath, opening to body sensations. But here's where it got interesting, and where we ended up spending most of our time—teaching them how to deal with their fear and anger. We gave the same instructions we've given here: go ahead and feel it in the body, don't try to do anything with it or make it go away, but simply let yourself experience it. See that it's just another emotion, that you can be with it, that it will come and then go.

Some of these young men turned out to be among the most motivated meditators I've encountered, because they desperately needed a way to work with what was happening inside them. Nobody had given them any tools for this. From that dire situation, some really took these practices to heart and worked diligently during all those hours lying on their bunks. They would return each week to share their experiences.

I remember one young man talking about using the breath to help him fall asleep. I asked him to investigate and report back: "Do you fall asleep on an in-breath or an out-breath?" The following week, when I asked what he'd discovered, he said, "I haven't figured it out yet, but I'm going to keep looking."

That was beautiful—seeing how, when we're in difficulty, we can dig deeply within ourselves and find strength we didn't know we possessed. This is something we hear in interviews every day. People say things like, "I was able to be still and accepting with strong physical pain," or "I watched an emotion arise without feeling so attached to it—I could observe its coming and going."

Sometimes when we're pressed to our limits, we discover something new, or something new emerges through us from that very friction of suffering. This is why we don't hesitate to place you in a fairly rigorous schedule here. I know for those new to retreat, sitting still for forty-five minutes hour after hour, with only walking meditation in between, is demanding. But the difficulty this brings up becomes the sand in the oyster that creates the pearl of wisdom.

Sometimes practice brings us to an extremity of suffering where something genuinely new breaks through. I want to share a story from the life of Ajahn Chah that illustrates this. Ajahn Chah was one of Thailand's great masters of the past fifty years. He died about ten years ago and was Jack Kornfield's first teacher.

When he was a young monk progressing in meditation, he felt he needed to face his deepest fears. In Thai culture, there's considerable fear of ghosts. When someone has recently died, people feel nervous about being near the body because the spirit is believed to wander for a while, and these spirits can be mischievous if not outright malicious. There's a general cultural anxiety about this, and Ajahn Chah acknowledged having this fear as well.

Deciding to confront it directly, he chose to meditate by a charnel ground. In Thai villages of that time, most people were cremated, as they still are today. There was a particular area near his village where bodies were burned. Knowing there would be a cremation on a certain day, he decided to arrive at dusk and sit all night beside the funeral pyre.

He arrived as the sun was setting. The body burned that day was a small child. The fire was dying down as he took his seat near the pyre. As he began to sit, fear arose. He thought, "Well, this is what I came for."

I'm not going to run away now. So he just kept sitting. And the fear was strong for him. But his determination was also strong, and so he just sat through the night, and he made it. No real problem. He came to the morning, and he said, "Time for my alms round." He collected his food, took some rest during the day, and he thought, "Well, that wasn't so bad. I think I'll do it again tonight."

And so he went to the charnel ground again that evening, but on this day, an adult man had been cremated. And that's a little scarier because the spirit is thought to be a little stronger. So he took his seat. The pyre was still burning. And the body hadn't been completely consumed at that point. So he took his seat with his back to the fire. It was dusk, getting dark. And as he sat and began his meditation, he could hear the flames licking and the sizzling of the body as it was still burning behind him.

And he said, then the fear really started to come. It was dark. And he knew that the body was very freshly burned. He said as he sat there, he started to get very afraid, more afraid than the night before. But he was determined. He just sat. As he was sitting with his eyes closed, from the direction of the pyre, he started to hear footsteps crinkling on the leaves, one after another, moving in his direction. Hadn't heard anybody approach. Just heard these footsteps.

So he resolved he was not going to open his eyes. The footsteps came closer and closer and they started to walk around him. And they walked around and stopped right in front of him. And he said at that point the fear was just rising all the time, every moment, just getting bigger and bigger. And when they stopped in front of him, he said the fear filled his whole body. It was just like somebody had poured a pitcher of water into a vessel and the fear was filling every corner of his body. He'd never been so afraid in his life.

And he sat there just scared out of his mind. He said, "I didn't even have the wits to meditate anymore. I couldn't think. I couldn't think what to do in meditation. All I could do was remain sitting there and be full of this intense fear." And finally, the idea came into his mind: what's the worst thing that could happen? And he thought, "The worst thing that could happen is I could die right here tonight." And he thought,

"Well, I have to die someday. I might as well die meditating. It's a better way to go than almost anything else. If I have to die, I have to die."

And in that moment of accepting the worst that could happen, he said all this intense fear energy that was filling his body just in one second turned into bliss. His body was just full of this strong, blissful energy. And he said at that point, it just filled him up, and he sat through the night with no problem at all. Just in one moment, that changed. And then his body felt light, obviously still energized. And at that point, the footsteps just walked away. And he never did open his eyes. He never did find out what they were from.

But he sat through the night, and he said later, looking back on that point in his practice, that he really felt he had turned a major corner in his practice because he had faced his strongest fear and it had transformed for him. He said he was never really bothered by fear again after that.

So sometimes even the things that sound like the worst experience we could have in practice turn out to be the moments of greatest understanding and in a way greatest freedom. And so we shouldn't necessarily hold ourselves back from going up against something that is very scary or very difficult to feel. But often a strength comes through that we didn't know we had. And it's that kind of understanding, that kind of insight that leads to the second link, which is faith.

The Pali term is saddha. The etymology of the term is "to place one's heart upon." So faith in Buddhism is not about subscribing to a series of beliefs—"I believe X, Y, and Z, therefore I have faith." Rather, faith is truly a heartfelt quality. A synonym for it is trust. Another synonym is confidence. So it's really looking inside your own heart and seeing what you trust in life. What can you place your heart upon that you feel can support you, can help you?

Traditionally in Buddhism, it's said that one feels this faith toward the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. But I think rather than accepting some rote formula, it's more important to feel the growth of trust in yourself—the kind of trust that lets you open in a moment of full awareness and presence without holding anything back. We resonate with the teachings to the extent that we think, "Yes, that sounds true." We hear the teachings and something in us recognizes their validity. Once we put the teachings into practice, we carry them out and see that they work. We see that they have the potential of freeing us from some of our suffering. On that experience, faith is built.

So faith really grows from experience, from taking the teachings, applying them, and testing them. And then we start to have a faith that we can walk the path, that we can do this ourselves—that this is not just about the Buddha, not just about other people, but really about us, that we have the potential to walk the path that frees us from suffering.

So we make an effort, and you all have made tremendous effort over this week. It's been beautiful to see. And in that effort, even though there's been much difficulty, we come to discover that along this path of awakening, there's really a great deal of joy, too. And this is the third link—the link of joy or gladness.

It's incredibly helpful, as Christina was pointing to in a talk the other night, to recognize these moments of joy and to cultivate this as part of your path and part of your life. We hear much in the Dharma about dukkha, dukkha, dukkha—about the suffering side of life. Sometimes we don't talk as much about the joyful side. One of the things I appreciate about this particular discourse is that it really shows how central joy and happiness are in the path. It's integral. It's necessary. And it can be developed.

Basically, we develop it like we develop mindfulness—by tuning in to it when it's there, appreciating it when it's there, really letting ourselves feel the joy that comes. When we turn the mind in this way, it helps support us. It brings about a cheerfulness because we keep inclining the mind toward that beautiful quality, that beautiful possibility.

The Buddha said that a practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. I don't know if you've ever felt at times that you were overwhelming yourself with suffering, but it's not a recommended part of the procedure. So we tune into joy where we can, where we find it.

On retreat, we notice that it's in the simple pleasures—waking up and having a warm shower, coming into the dining hall and finding a beautiful meal before us, the simple pleasure of when you're tired, just being able to rest your body for sleep at night. All these simple pleasures we can tune into every day. Some of these simple pleasures, because we become so sensitive on retreat, become really heightened.

I remember times in the early days on retreat when what we had for evening tea was a cup of herbal tea, about five peanuts—they were rationed—and a piece of fruit. But I have to say that an orange and a cup of herbal tea tasted much better than many expensive restaurant meals I've had. It was like gourmet dining, just that piece of fruit and the tea.

The Buddha mentioned something like this too. He said that robes, alms food, and a small hut will seem rich and luxurious to one who has renounced, because the senses become so alive.

In a setting like this, there's also the joy of nature, and we can open to that almost any time. Seeing the sun for the first time in about three days brings such joy. It reminds me of one of the periods when I was practicing in Thailand. I'd recently been ordained as a monk and first went up to practice in a really small monastery in the north of Thailand, outside of Chiang Mai—about forty miles outside of Chiang Mai. This monastery was like a little gem, tucked down at the bottom of a deep canyon, with a river that ran through the middle of it.

The monastery was truly remarkable in its equality—the only place I encountered in Thailand where facilities for men and women were genuinely equitable. The nuns' kutis, or huts, were situated on one side of the creek, while the monks' quarters occupied the other, both provided with excellent amenities.

With their characteristic hospitality toward foreigners, the Thai community graciously offered me the finest hut in the entire monastery—the one positioned furthest up the canyon. From this secluded perch, I

couldn't see any other dwellings, creating an atmosphere of complete privacy and seclusion that proved ideal for meditation practice.

The natural setting was breathtaking. We were nestled at the base of a steep canyon with walls rising dramatically on both sides. The sun would appear relatively early each day but would also set early, creating a rhythm of light and shadow. A river flowed constantly beside my dwelling, offering me the choice of sitting outside by the water or retreating indoors to escape the mosquitoes. It was an extraordinarily beautiful environment for practice.

Yet simultaneously, this period marked a challenging phase in my spiritual journey. Having recently ordained, I was still adjusting to monastic life, learning to embody the role of a new monk. For three months, I practiced under a teacher who spoke no English while I knew no Thai. This meant not only the absence of evening dharma talks, but no interviews whatsoever.

My interactions with the ajahn were minimal and rather amusing. He would occasionally bring visitors to observe the foreign monk in meditation. They would peer through my screen windows, and fortunately, I was always engaged in practice. I could hear the ajahn exclaiming, "Oh, di, di!"—"good, good"—indicating to his guests that I was indeed practicing diligently. Then they would depart, and I wouldn't see them for another week or so.

This situation demanded tremendous self-reliance. I experienced periods of profound loneliness and considerable physical discomfort during meditation. The isolation was palpable—there was no other Western practitioner with whom I could discuss my practice or share the challenges I was facing.

Despite these difficulties, I look back on that time with deep fondness because I felt profoundly sustained by the natural beauty surrounding me. The river, the rocks, the magnificent canyon itself provided such supportive energy that it literally kept me going through the challenging moments.

One particular memory remains vivid: a large mango tree grew directly outside my kuti. Each morning I would walk beneath its branches to breakfast and return the same way. It happened to be mango season, so ripe fruit was constantly falling to the ground, splitting open and releasing the most intoxicating fragrance as I passed. Unfortunately, monastic rules prevented me from collecting even fallen fruit—we may only accept food offered directly from another person's hands. All I could do was inhale that delicious aroma. It was a kind of exquisite frustration.

Opening to the beauty of the natural world provides tremendous support for our practice. There is profound joy and retreat available in the peace, stillness, and concentration that meditation offers. Someone mentioned in an interview recently, "I don't think my mind has ever been this quiet before in my life." This resonates deeply with my own experience.

When I reflect on those early years, I realize how delicious it was to experience such mental quietude, to touch that profound stillness. In many ways, this is what drew me back to meditation retreats repeatedly.

I would think, "If the mind can become this still, how much deeper can this stillness go? What else becomes possible within this silence?"

The silence does continue to deepen, and insights continue to blossom from that stillness like flowers emerging from fertile ground.

There is also genuine joy in encountering truth, even when that truth proves difficult to accept—as it often does in retreat practice. Our colleague Ruth Dennison, a deeply respected teacher of German origin, had a wonderfully direct way of expressing this: "You know, darling, self-knowledge is never good news."

This observation rings true. Self-knowledge rarely arrives as pleasant news. Even our insights can be challenging to accept, sometimes difficult to fully absorb. We might recognize deeply conditioned patterns of inadequacy, fear, loneliness, or the desperate need for approval that have perhaps driven much of our lives. These realizations can be quite hard to bear.

Yet if you look closely, you'll discover there is genuine delight even in seeing these difficult patterns. In the very act of witnessing them clearly, we recognize the possibility of liberation. There emerges the potential for freedom from these habitual ways of being, opening us to entirely different ways of living. Even within the most challenging insights lies this seed of transformation and hope.

Joy is really intrinsic to the nature of things—intrinsic to our own life, as Christina mentioned, and intrinsic in existence itself. You can feel this in nature, just opening up to the lushness of this midsummer growth in Massachusetts, the play of sunlight on the leaves in the late afternoon. You can feel the delight in all of that.

Hinduism has this expression they use to refer to the nature of reality: Sat Chit Ananda—being, consciousness, bliss. These are understood as the three aspects of reality. And you can tune into this any time you want to open your eyes to it. I often use the play of light to tune into that—the radiance of life outside or the reflections of light inside. It reminds me of the sparkle of that bliss in existence. When the mind gets relaxed and you can start to tune into this, the amount of joy in a moment can be huge, really huge.

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 beings." It's really always there.

This quality of joy then intensifies into the next link in the chain, which is called rapture. The Pali for this is pīti. The understanding of rapture is that it's the intensification of joy as we bring it into our meditation subject. So we take that gladness and delight that we feel perhaps externally, and we find a way to activate it or transfer it into the domain of meditation.

Rapture is really about an interest and delight in what we're experiencing. In this way, a good synonym

for it is rapt attention. So subjects like the breath at times become really fascinating and delightful. The level of detail that we start to find in taking a step in walking meditation becomes a real subject of interest and joy for us. Another good synonym for this kind of rapture is joyful interest—when you find that your mind is delighted in the process of being with your experience, being closely with it, experiencing it intimately.

The quality of rapture is highly thought of in the teachings. It's one of the jhanic factors associated with strong concentration, and it's also one of the seven factors of enlightenment. This particular quality is a factor of mind, but it's often accompanied by a lot of bodily energy. So it's said that rapture has physical manifestations like goosebumps, jolts of energy, uplifting energy, where the body starts to feel very light. And it's said the intensification of this can lead to levitation. So beware—you might find yourself bouncing around the room.

We often first notice this quality in a heightened sense of physical energy. The physical energy can come up really strongly in rapture and actually be quite turbulent. It seems like we might be going backwards in the meditation, but when the factor of rapture in the mind is there, it's not the case. It's a new deepening process.

But this rapture, because it has at times a turbulent quality, can be softened, can be mellowed. And that's done through the next step in the chain, which is tranquility. As the rapture intensifies in the mind, the mind's delight tends to start calming down the bodily energy. So the experience of tranquility comes in. You could also call it relaxation or ease or serenity. And that starts to bring a calmness also in the body. What this allows us to do is really settle into the moment in an easy way, in a calm and relaxed way.

That then leads to the next factor on the path, which is often translated as happiness. The Pali word for this is sukha. I like this Pali word because it sounds like the same root as sugar. In French, sugar is sucre, which sounds a lot like sukha. And sukha has this kind of sweetness to it—it's like a very sweet state of mind. It is also one of the jhanic factors, one of the strong factors of concentration.

When the Buddha put his teachings together, he talked a lot about suffering and the end of suffering. But you know, this could all be expressed in a little different way. In California, for instance, talking a lot about suffering doesn't go down so well. Because the response is: "California, suffering? Suffering? Dude, I'm out of here."

I'm going to go surf today.

So, in California, rather than talking about the first noble truth being the truth of suffering, I think if the Buddha were alive today, he might say something like, "Well, the first noble truth is there are many opportunities for growth in life." Something like that. And the third noble truth—a Californian would never describe it as the end of suffering. They'd describe it as the development of happiness.

This is actually not too bad. When suffering goes away, obviously what's in its place is happiness. And you

may have noticed that the Dalai Lama's most popular book so far was called *The Art of Happiness*. It was on the bestseller list in the Bay Area for over a year. If it had been titled *The End of Suffering*, I don't think it would have gotten there.

So happiness really is the outgrowth of the path. It's intended to be the outgrowth of the path. In this way of looking, it's a deeper kind of flowering than the gladness—the kind of momentary gladness that arises with conditions of nature or inner discovery. It's considered to be more stable, and so maybe a more accurate term for it is contentment. It has qualities of acceptance and peace.

There's a real settledness in this kind of happiness because it's joy that's been intensified to rapture but then mellowed out through tranquility. So it's a fuller kind of blooming. We could say that the momentary arisings of joy depend on some condition to be triggered, but happiness doesn't. This kind of happiness doesn't depend on external conditions. It becomes a more stable quality of heart and mind. But it's still impermanent. It's not completely stable, but it's a little more stable.

I think part of the happiness is the quality of coming home—that feeling of arriving in the present moment, feeling integrated, feeling balanced, and really being fully present, being able to have our whole heart and mind in touch with the present moment. I often feel if I could just always live with that attitude of fullness of heart and mind, anything could happen and life would be okay. I could meet anything in life from that kind of place.

This reminds me of a poem from Rumi. When Rumi says "you" in a poem, he usually means the divine, whatever form that means to you. But in this, I think of that basic sanity as another way that this "you" could be understood—this basic centeredness and wholeheartedness.

"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."

We find ourselves back with ourselves, really connected with ourselves in a deep way through this kind of stability. I think it's one of the most satisfying aspects of dharma practice.

Sometimes we misunderstand happiness and think that in order to be happy, we have to make it permanent. But happiness can't be secured into the future. If we think about just finding happiness in this one moment, that's really all we can do, and that's a lot easier. It becomes much more accessible if we think about it as a momentary arising. As we say in dharma language: take care of this moment and you take care of all time.

What's interesting is that the practice doesn't stop here. Even though we've arrived at this quality of happiness in the unfolding, there's still more. Many times in my practice I would have been quite happy to roll up the mat at this point. But there's more. That's one of the things the Buddha said. He said, "Two things I never lost track of in my practice. One was not to be lazy in my effort. The second was not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind"—not to settle just for wholesome states of mind, but to remember

that what we're really walking the path for is unconditional freedom.

So happiness continues the deepening process. The next step in the link is concentration, or samadhi. We usually believe that concentration is the result of a lot of effort—that we have to work really hard to bring concentration about. But what this teaching shows, and it's stated explicitly in a number of places, is that the proximate cause of concentration is happiness.

I find that really interesting to reflect on. The immediate cause of concentration is happiness.

And you can get a sense of that when there's happiness—the mind is quite content to settle into the present moment, really settle fully into the present moment. It doesn't need to go looking outside itself through the movements of desire or aversion. It's really that external searching that creates the distraction that takes us away from this basic wholeheartedness.

So as we settle more and more with happiness, the mind just collects, becomes unified. And as it becomes unified, it gets that strength back. We've given away that strength through a lot of distracted thinking. As it comes back together, the strength returns to us, and that's where you have the feeling of stability, of steadiness, of stillness in your sitting.

Concentration also is not an end goal, although it's very pleasant, but it's considered the base for insight. So the next step in the chain is knowing and seeing things as they are. When the mind is still, we can see reality the way it is. When the mind is spinning, we really can't. It's kind of like we're on a merry-go-round. We've hopped on one of the horses, the merry-go-round's gotten cranked up, and it's just going round and round and round. This is the mind before this practice.

One of our friends walks up to the edge of the merry-go-round and is holding today's newspaper. They hold it up in front of us as we go round and round and round. But we can't read the headlines because we're going too fast. Every time we go by, it's just a blur. Then the merry-go-round slows down, and we come to rest in front of our friend, and then we can read the headlines: Everything's changing. Hold on and you'll suffer. Freedom is found through letting go. I get it.

So concentration or stillness of mind is the foundation for insight. This seeing things as they are really refers to seeing the impermanent nature of everything, of how everything that we can contact through our senses is just arising and passing. And if we try to hold on to it, we'll suffer. It won't bring lasting happiness.

As that seeing deepens, it leads to the next link, which is disenchantment. Christina mentioned this in her talk last night, this factor of mind. Disenchantment is really a recognition that none of the phenomena of the sensory world are going to do it for us. Our quest for security, for freedom, for lasting peace aren't going to be found by holding on to anything that comes out of the senses because every one of those is subject to passing. As that sinks in more and more, it cuts down our tendency to grasp and to look for happiness outside of ourselves or through special states inside of ourselves.

This disenchantment doesn't mean that the world all of a sudden looks ugly or that we think it's dreadful that we're here. I don't think it's that way at all. Somebody asked one of my teachers, a Tibetan teacher on a retreat, "All this talk about suffering, doesn't it keep you from enjoying the beauty of the world?" The teacher replied, "It's only the yogins and yoginis who are free from attachment who are truly able to appreciate the beauty of this world."

I think this is really true, and I think you can see it yourself in your experience in meditation. At times when you feel really present and clear and free, that's when the world really lights up. That's when you see the beauty of other people, of nature, of all these appearances. The Buddha said something similar: "The beauty of this world remains the same, but the wise do not cling to it."

As this disenchantment develops, it really affects a fundamental shift in our relationship to the world. We lose the motivation to be in the world for all the great things we can get out of it. As that tendency to grasp goes away, we start to be in the world more and more out of a sense of what can I offer back to it. You could say it's the awakening of a bodhisattva spirit, of a spirit of really wanting to be in the world to be of benefit to others, to be of service to others.

As this disenchantment deepens, it opens to the next link in the chain, which is called dispassion. The Pali term is viraga, and the literal meaning is "without lust." This is the state where the heart has really moved away from craving and aversion so strongly and abides in a place of deep peace. In actual fact, this term viraga or dispassion is a synonym in the texts for nibbana, which the Buddha described in this way: "Insofar as the practitioner has abandoned greed, aversion, and confusion, insofar is nibbana realizable, immediate, inviting, and attractive."

This direct realization of nibbana, the state of unconditioned peace and freedom, then is the precursor to the next link, which is liberation. The Pali term is vimutti. At this stage, the liberation that's talked about is irreversible. It's sometimes called in the suttas the "unshakable deliverance of mind." After someone has come to this level of realization, there's a standard phrase that's used to describe their situation. They often say, "Done is what had to be done."

Lived is the holy life. There is no more coming to any renewed state of being. The journey has been accomplished. The path has been walked to its completion.

Then there is one final step in this chain, which is called knowing the destruction of the taints. After liberation, it is said that the awakened one realizes that all the impurities—the deepest impurities of ignorance, sense desire, and desire for becoming—have all been lifted and removed from their heart.

So this is the state of the journey, the description of the journey itself: founded and beginning on suffering, moving through faith and the opening to joy and happiness, then that deepening sense of being that with insight sees things the way they are. It's presented as a linear chain, but in actual fact, I think we go through most of these steps over and over and over again.

I suspect that in the week you've been here, you've been through most of the early steps along this way. You've experienced moments of suffering and moments of faith, moments of joy and moments of tranquility, moments of happiness and moments of insight that lead to letting go, that lead to disenchantment. We circle through these stages many, many times on the path at deeper and deeper levels until hopefully liberation accompanies them.

I remember when I was on an early retreat here at IMS, and I heard a talk that spoke about the positive unfolding of the path, and I became very desirous. I got very impatient about reaching the end, and I think that's one of the risks of lending an ear to this kind of talk. I went to the teacher the very next day for an interview. The teacher had given the talk, and I walked in, and I really wanted to shake him by the shoulders and say, "Richard, when's it going to happen for me?" That was really what I wanted to know. When is this going to happen for me? This is really what I want. How long is it going to take?

He said, of course, being an honest person, "I don't know." And who does know? But the beauty of this kind of description is that happiness is not only possible as we continue the journey—it's really inevitable. It's such an intrinsic part of the whole journey that it does have to come in time. We just don't know when. We don't know the pace. We can't set the pace of our own unfolding.

The Buddha said something like this: "A practitioner doesn't know how much of the fetters are wearing away every day, but he does know they wear away." And then he went on to say that the fetters of the mind, the things that hold us in bondage, rot away in meditation the way that the sails of an ocean-going ship will rot away when the ship is beached and left to the elements of wind and salt air and sun and rain. The fetters of the mind rot away in meditation like the sails of an ocean-going ship rot in the elements.

So we know that this path is a path of purification. What we don't know is the rate at which it's going to unfold for any of us. We can't control it. We can't force it. Even if we devote all of our time to formal mindfulness practice, there's a certain point beyond which we can't accelerate the process. It's really out of our control. It rests on our past karma and on our current effort.

So the best thing is just to relax with that faith and trust that the Dharma will carry you there. You can relax into the stream of Dharma practice as you make your effort, and know it only leads in one direction. It leads in this direction of freedom.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "As a result of his experience, the Buddha taught that the practice has to develop naturally, according to conditions. You allow things to develop according to your accumulated wholesome karma and paramis, which means your virtues. 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."

So we really do just surrender into the stream of the Dharma. We trust and we let it carry us.

I'll close with one other quotation from the Buddha. Someone came and asked him, "How did you cross the flood?" What this means in Dharma language is, how did you cross the flood of existence, of becoming, of samsara? It basically asks, how did you become liberated?

This was the Buddha's reply: "I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying."

When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away.

This profound teaching captures the essence of the Middle Way—neither clinging nor pushing, neither forcing nor resisting. The Buddha's words point to that delicate balance where we move with the natural flow of awakening, neither holding back in fear nor rushing ahead in impatience.

When we tarry—when we hesitate, doubt, or cling to our familiar ways of being—we sink beneath the waters of confusion and suffering. When we hurry—when we grasp for quick results or try to force our spiritual unfolding—we are swept away by the very current we're trying to navigate.

The path of liberation asks us to find that middle ground, that place of dynamic equilibrium where we can move with wisdom and grace. We learn to neither resist the current of change nor be overwhelmed by it. We discover how to be present with what is arising while remaining open to what wants to emerge.

This is the art of crossing the flood—meeting each moment with awareness, allowing the Dharma to guide us naturally toward freedom. In this way, we learn to trust the process of awakening itself, surrendering our need to control while remaining fully engaged with the journey.

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

[A moment of shared silence]

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