Purity and Purification

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 52:33

The subject of tonight's talk is purity and purification.

At the last retreat I was teaching at Spirit Rock, somebody asked a question that went something like this: "Sometimes you all talk to us about just accepting ourselves and just accepting the moment—just the way the moment is, just the way we are. And other times you talk about all these great qualities we're supposed to be developing, like love and compassion and wisdom and concentration. I'm confused. What is it I'm supposed to be doing here? Am I supposed to be accepting myself or am I supposed to be improving myself?"

Of course, asking this in a Buddhist context is always a little risky, because improving the self when there isn't supposed to be one is kind of a risky project to spend a lot of time on. But I thought this was an interesting question because it actually goes to what I think is the heart of the Buddha's teachings as expressed in a concept known as the two truths—two different ways of looking at the world, both of which are important, but that seemingly contradict one another.

These two truths in the tradition are talked about as the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. We might say for the purpose of understanding it tonight that conventional truth is the way we see the world when we look with language, with words. It's the way we usually look at the world.

Looking really conventionally, we'd look this evening and we'd say, well, it's 7:30 p.m. and we're in the meditation hall. Looking around, we see a woman, a man, zafu, chair, floor, you, me, and so forth. That all makes really good sense. All these distinctions make a lot of sense, and it's very useful for socially relating. Because with distinctions like this, at the end of the retreat, I don't get into your car and drive away—and I hope you appreciate that. And at the end of the day today, you're not going to come into my room to go to sleep in my bed—and I will appreciate that. So these are very useful distinctions, this conventional truth.

Time is an aspect of conventional truth. Time is a concept. Past and future, seven o'clock, tomorrow, yesterday, 30 years old, 60 years old—these are all concepts. So when we talk about, as we do, how with our Dharma practice we develop over time through practice, we're in the conventional realm. We're in the language of concepts. And we do, over time, develop in qualities like a little more equanimity, a little more patience, a little more kindness, a little more wisdom. These are truths about Dharma practice, and this is not to deny the development of these qualities as they take place over time. This is absolutely true.

So we could say that self-improvement is a truth within Dharma teachings, within Dharma practice, or probably the way we prefer to say it is growth in the Dhamma—that we grow in the teachings, we grow in

the truth. But it's an aspect of conventional truth.

Now an interesting thing about conventional truth is that it's from the Pali term sammuti-sacca. Sacca means truth. Sammuti has a really interesting etymology. The term literally means "all-concealing." So the implication is that the world of concepts is a truth, but it's a concealing truth. It conceals a more fundamental and more important truth from our eyes. So when all we see is the world of language and concepts, the conventional reality, we're blinded from seeing something more truthful, more underlying.

This more underlying truth is called the ultimate truth. In Pali, the term is paramattha-sacca. Paramattha means literally "highest meaning truth." So the conventional truth is a truth, but it's not the truth with the highest meaning. To get to the truth with the highest meaning, we have to see beneath the obscuring truth of concepts and words.

Let's just say that the ultimate truth is the truth we see when we look at the world without any language, without any words, without any concepts.

Now when we say reality in a Buddhist context, we mean something a little different than in a Western context. In a Western context, normally when people say reality, they mean the outside world, the physical world. But in a Buddhist context, when we say reality, we mean the reality of human experience.

So I'd like to ask you to take a look. What is the nature of your human experience when it's not touched by language? Just in this moment, take a look. Open your senses.

Open your awareness. What is the nature of your experience when no words intrude or shape or mold it? That means we can't be thinking about "me" or "you" because these are concepts. We can't move into past and future because those are concepts. What are we left with?

Can you describe it? Kind of tricky, isn't it? How do you describe something where words can't find a hold? You can't grasp it while you're experiencing it because if you grasp it and make any image of it, then words are coming in. So you almost have to enter it, abandon the words, and know you're in a territory that can't be described. And then as you come back out of that into the world of concepts and language, you may have a little memory of what that was like. And so then language may come in again.

So it's said that the ultimate truth is not describable. It's not describable. But that doesn't stop us from trying. Some of the words that people have used, that practitioners have used, that you may be able to relate to, are words like being, now, arising, passing, vastness, still, empty, free, beauty, love. You might say that these are words that kind of point to the nature of reality, or as Suzuki Roshi said in his beautifully fractured English, "the nature of things as it is."

This is the realm of the ultimate truth. One aspect of this truth is that we're not in conflict with it—that there's a quality in this coming beyond words, a real quality of acceptance, of a radical kind of acceptance that doesn't have any kind of friction, as Rodney said last night, any struggle, any sense of disturbance

with what is.

So this movement of acceptance is a movement in the direction of an ultimate truth of things as they are. And as we start to contact that more and more, we also find that there's a purity in the nature of reality. The nature of things just as they are—there's an incredible purity. When we open to this purity, we can connect with a sense of freedom in the here and now because of this lack of friction, lack of struggle, lack of conflict.

As we open to that freedom that is the way things are, it doesn't stop there, but it furthers the journey. And it's really contact with this purity that provides the motive force that carries us along the path. So we might say that the sense of self-improvement grows directly out of our ability to accept. The more deeply we can accept and open to things as it is, the more the journey unfolds for us spontaneously. And we make the first step on that journey when we turn to mindfulness, because mindfulness is an aspect of this purity, of this ultimate kind of nature.

So we could say that what our practice is about is understanding this ultimate nature and also the conventional nature of things. In a way you could say it's like understanding the impersonal quality of reality, but also not denying the personal.

Dostoevsky has this famous line—I think it's at the start of Anna Karenina—where he says that every happy family is very much alike, and every unhappy family is different in its own way. This is that juxtaposition of the impersonal and the personal. The ultimate reality is all alike. Your ultimate reality can't really be any different than my ultimate reality, or we wouldn't be communicating about it. So the ultimate nature for you and for me is probably no different. This is all happy families. This is the purity.

But the way that the conventional world springs up, there are differences. One of the ways that we see these differences are in the ways that we suffer. The unhappy families are all different. And we could say that when we look at our suffering, we're all different in that way. We have different tendencies. We get caught in different ways.

This innate purity of mind in some traditions in Buddhism is called the Buddha nature. And it's described as basically having three aspects. It's awake, it's peaceful, and it's friendly. These are the three key pieces of our Buddha nature. And we activate it—we start to wake it up and touch it as we develop mindfulness. And it's really the activation of this Buddha nature that takes us down the path.

As we touch it and activate it, it starts to wake up and it has its own momentum. It will grow, it will deepen, it will expand all by itself. And it tends to do that as soon as we start waking it up with mindful attention—until it hits an obstacle, which it always will. For us, as beginners on the path, it will hit an obstacle. The obstacles we could talk about as the five hindrances that Rodney talked about this morning. We could talk about various kinds of distracting thoughts that take us away from the present moment in one of those directions. We get entangled in some kind of unhappiness, and we lose touch with the basic

purity of our nature.

And when we lose touch with that, the whole mass of suffering arises because we have forgotten how to contact that purity. We've lost touch with our innate nature.

So now we're in the territory of suffering, in the territory of confusion, in the territory of unhappiness. And in order to be free, we have to understand this side of things as well. We have to understand it clearly so that we're not trapped by it anymore.

So I want to talk about this aspect of mind that engages us in suffering. These hindrances are deeply conditioned tendencies of mind, and I was reminded of this this afternoon. I was sitting at a table in the kitchen where I'm staying and looking out the window into the woods. There was a tree that had fallen over and was leaning up at about a forty-five-degree angle, sticking about ten feet into the air.

I saw a big bird fly down to the ground and pick up what looked like a little snake about a foot long, then fly up and perch on top of this fallen tree. As it sat there—I could see it was a hawk—it trapped what looked like this snake under its claws. It would reach down and take a bite out of the snake with its beak, chew it for a while, and swallow it. Then it would lean its head down, take another bite, shake a piece off, and swallow it until the snake was all gone. Afterwards, it just sat on that fallen tree for about forty-five minutes in the sunshine, relaxing and enjoying this beautiful afternoon with a full stomach. I thought, that's just what we tend to do after a good meal.

But this really pointed up the depths of the conditioned tendencies of mind. In the Buddhist tradition, we talk about these tendencies as greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed is so closely connected with the desire for survival and food. If we don't have food, we don't live very long as an embodied being. At the same time, as in the animal realm, they need to eat other beings. So every animal wishes most deeply not to be eaten by another animal. That's a source of fear and aversion—we don't want to surrender our life to become somebody else's meal. On the basic animal level, that's the reality in that realm.

As animals ourselves, we've inherited all those responses. We've inherited this insecurity about bodily existence, this desire to continue, this fear of being terminated. Because we don't understand these forces clearly, because we can't see them with wisdom very clearly, they drive us, they compel us. These are the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion that the Buddha talked about again and again as the roots of our suffering. These are the very forces in the mind that inevitably bring us back to suffering. Until they're understood, until they're released, we are going to suffer.

Greed is the tendency to reach out for the pleasant—the compulsive tendency to reach for the pleasant. Aversion is the conditioned tendency to push away what's unpleasant. Delusion is the cloud in the mind that doesn't see the operation of greed and aversion. So greed or aversion are always accompanied by delusion. Why? Because if we could see them, we wouldn't do it. Nobody wants to be greedy. Nobody wants to be aversive. Nobody wants to be dominated by fear or aggression. But because they operate

unconsciously, we don't see it. And so we're taken over and compelled, driven by these forces.

In the most deeply conditioned sense, it is these age-old forces of greed, aversion, and delusion that bring us into suffering, bring us into confusion over and over.

Now there's another way that these manifest, especially in the retreat environment, and it has to do with a developmental and psychological process. As we have grown up, we have encountered painful situations many times in our life—from the time that we were just born, to being infants, to being children, to being teenagers and being adults. We've encountered painful situations that have brought up really difficult emotions: levels of fear or anxiety or betrayal or guilt or shame or hatred or wanting that we couldn't cope with, that overwhelmed our ability to understand.

Not being able to cope with them, being frightened by the strength of our emotions, at some time or another we've closed down on them because they were just too much for us at that young age. So we tried to find a way to escape from them, to push them down under and to put our minds somewhere else—often into thinking, again as Rodney said last night.

Over the course of a lifetime, we have stored up these unresolved emotions. They've settled in our muscles, in our tissues, they've formed contractions, and they've taken our mental energy to hold them. Through years of unconscious living, deluded living, we've become contracted, and in that contraction more armored, more defended, and less alive in our bodies and in our minds.

As awareness starts to penetrate the mind-body system through the practice of mindfulness, we start to uncover these layers of holding.

When sadness arises during this process, sometimes tears will come. That's absolutely natural and fine. Tears are simply a physical expression of the emotional release that's happening. The body has its own wisdom for processing these stored energies, and crying can be part of that natural healing process.

Now, the tricky part is the thoughts. When we're feeling sad, certain kinds of thoughts tend to arise. Sometimes they're memories of losses we've experienced. Sometimes they're thoughts about what's missing in our life, what we wish we had, what we've never had. Sometimes they're thoughts about how unfair life is, or how much pain there is in the world.

These thoughts aren't wrong, but we need to be skillful with them. If we get caught up in thinking about the sadness, we move away from the direct experience of it. We go into our heads and lose touch with what's actually happening in our body and heart in this moment.

So when thoughts arise, simply notice them. You might note "thinking" or "memory" or "story." Then gently return your attention to the direct experience—the sensations in your chest, the quality of the mood itself.

The key instruction here is: Stay close. Don't push the sadness away, and don't get lost in the thoughts

about it. Rest right at the edge of the emotion itself. Let yourself feel it fully without drowning in stories about it.

Often what happens is that if we can stay present with the emotion in this way—connected to the body sensations, aware of the mental mood, noting the thoughts without getting caught in them—the emotion will naturally transform. It might intensify for a while, but then it begins to move and change. Sometimes it shifts into something else entirely. Sometimes it simply dissolves.

This is the paradox of emotions in meditation practice. The very thing we're afraid will overwhelm us, when we meet it with awareness and presence, often turns out to be quite manageable. It's our resistance to feeling it, our fear of being overwhelmed, that actually creates more suffering than the emotion itself.

The same approach applies to all the difficult emotions that arise in practice. With anger, you might feel heat and tension in your body, perhaps in your jaw or shoulders or belly. The storyline might be about how someone has wronged you, or how things should be different. With fear, there might be a tight, contracted feeling, perhaps a sense of shakiness or vulnerability. The story might be about some danger, real or imagined.

With each emotion, the practice is the same: Find where it lives in the body. Notice the particular quality of the mental state. See the thoughts that arise without getting lost in them. Stay present and allow the natural intelligence of awareness to do its work.

This takes courage. It takes a willingness to feel what we've been avoiding, sometimes for many years. But this is how we begin to free up all that energy that's been locked away in our bodies and minds. This is how we start to live more fully and authentically.

Now, a lot of thoughts may be coming and going around the sadness. It may be the belief, "Oh, I can't go into it, it's too much." It may be memories of specific losses, specific people, specific times in your life. As far as possible, just let the thoughts come and go. Don't get too involved in pursuing them. Notice that they're there—they'll have a certain flavor—but try not to get involved going down that track. So mostly go back and forth between the physical sensation and the mental tone or the mood of that emotion.

Now the attitude is really important. We're not trying to change anything in our awareness of the sadness. We're not trying to make it go away. We're not trying to make it get smaller. We're also not trying to open it up and make a project out of it. Because we can do that with emotions—emotions can become a long-term project in meditation. A lot of people come to meditation with the motivation to heal their emotional life. I did myself. But I found out there are some problems with healing as a motivation in meditation.

The first one is: how do you know when you're done? How do you know when you're done with healing? Do you just need to heal back to the level of a normal, neurotic person? And once you're normal again, can the healing stop and you can go on with your life?

Suzuki Roshi, a great Zen master, once opened a dharma talk like this. He said, "The difficulties you're experiencing now..." and he just stopped. Long pause. Everybody's attention was riveted on him. And then he continued: "The difficulties you're experiencing now will be with you for a very long time."

Now how do we hear that? That could be kind of depressing. "Jeez, I thought I was getting rid of this stuff." But the way he really intended it, and the way you can take it if you think about it, it's really liberating. It means that the way to freedom is not that we have to get rid of these emotions.

We all have the whole package. The whole human package includes sadness and fear and doubt and self-judgment and anger and disappointment and sorrow and blame and wanting and joy and happiness and compassion and love and calm and peace. We all know all of these things. So it's not about—in the beginning stages of the path, intermediate stages of the path, quite advanced stages of the path—it's not about getting rid of these things. According to the traditional teachings, none of these emotions go away until the third stage of enlightenment, which is a very high level of freedom. It's the stage before full liberation. So we accept the fact that these states of mind will be visiting us for a long time.

So what does healing mean? It doesn't mean that we get rid of them.

The second problem with healing as a motivation is it won't take us all the way. If that's our sole motivation for coming into dharma practice, it won't take us to liberation. Well, it can take us partway, but it won't take us all the way.

And there's a third problem with healing, and this is probably the most interesting from my point of view. If we think we need to heal, there's an underlying belief that we usually associate with that, and that is the belief that we're broken. "I have to heal" means there's something wrong with me as I am. That I'm broken. I've gone wrong in some way. And this is a crippling kind of view to take up if we really believe that we're broken.

And I don't understand the range of mind that's usually described as psychosis. I haven't gone into it. I haven't studied it. I don't know about that. But I will say for everybody in this room: you are not broken. You have not been broken. Short of psychosis, which I just don't know about, even the suffering that we are exposed to...

is a lawful suffering. It has its causes and conditions. It comes because of certain reasons. We don't understand them all—we may never understand them all—but it's not coming because there's something wrong with us. We are simply operating, developing, and unfolding along the natural laws of cause and effect, operating in this world, operating in this universe. We never got broken.

And because of that, we don't need to be put back together. So there is a lot of healing that happens in meditation, but that view is, in a way, an incomplete one. It's a noble motivation in coming to meditation, but it's not a complete one.

As these conditioned tendencies, as these accumulations come to mind and we touch them with mindfulness, we can find a lot of freedom in relation to them. As you practice with them, you'll discover this freedom little by little.

I want to suggest a mnemonic that, as far as I know, was invented by a colleague of ours, Michele McDonald-Smith, who teaches here at IMS. I've found it a really helpful reminder of how to work with difficult emotions. The mnemonic is RAIN—R-A-I-N—and it stands for recognition, acceptance, interest, and non-identification.

Let's say a difficult emotion is coming, like sadness. The first step is to recognize it and just say, "Oh, this is sadness." Naming it is very helpful. Even if you don't use noting throughout the day, in your sittings, in your walkings, in your in-between times, it's very helpful to use a soft note in connection with these emotions. There's something about getting the right name for what we're feeling that loosens the fixation of it. There's a way in which once we recognize it, awareness and wisdom hold it in a different way. So finding out what you're feeling is a very fruitful investigation. Come close to that mental state and see what the best name you can find for it is. Recognize it.

The second step is acceptance. This actually doesn't mean we have to do something special or something positive. It really means just that we drop our resistance to it. We drop the sense: "This shouldn't be happening. I don't want it here. When can it go away? It better be gone by tomorrow or I'm leaving the retreat. I really didn't come here to experience this in the first place. Something's going wrong with my meditation. I was peaceful yesterday and now I'm not." We drop all those judgments and just let ourselves feel directly the energy of sadness. We just open to it and accept it to the extent we can.

The third factor that really helps the acceptance is the quality of interest. If we can get curious about it—what does sadness feel like? How does it feel in the body? How does it feel in the mind? What kind of thoughts come when it's there? What does it make me feel about myself? How do I see the world when I'm in this place of sadness? Once we can get interested, that brings a wholesome quality to our relationship to it, and it perks up the whole situation.

And the last is non-identification. This means we don't take it as I or me or mine. We don't say it's my sadness. We don't say I'm sad. We just say sadness is present. It's just another of the pieces of the human package. It's arisen in this moment. It will last for a while. It will pass away. Just part of the changing weather.

It's this quality of passing that makes all the emotions safe to go into. If you open to any emotion, you'll find it'll be there for a while. It may not be pleasant, but in time it will go away. Is there any emotion that's lasted since this retreat started? Has anybody seen one that hasn't gone yet? They all come and they all go. And this is why we can basically trust them. It's why it's safe to open to these feelings. We can let them come, they'll last for a while, and on their own, without our trying to push them away, each one in its own time will go.

Because they're impermanent, they really can't hurt us. It was the fear of them that made us close down on them and store them in the body that has caused all the havoc. And to see a really kind of enlightened way of relating with emotions—half-enlightened, I should say—

Look at children. When children feel happy, they're completely happy. They dive fully into that experience of joy. When they feel scared, they're genuinely terrified. They don't hold anything back. If they're angry about something, they let you know with their whole being. Children have this fearless way of going completely into whatever emotion arises, and then perhaps five or ten minutes later, they're entirely out of it.

This is the kind of emotional fluency we can cultivate. What children don't possess, however, is the wisdom not to act unskillfully on their emotions. They do tend to spread their suffering around somewhat. We can learn not to spread it around while maintaining that same openness—being unafraid to go directly into the emotion and feel it one hundred percent.

When people discuss equanimity and the qualities that develop through meditation practice, sometimes they imagine that all emotions simply disappear. Some think this might not be such a bad thing, while others recoil at the thought. But from what I understand of the path thus far, this doesn't happen. We don't experience some kind of emotional lobotomy where all sources of pain are removed and we walk around like emotionless beings.

Rather, equanimity develops in relationship to emotions—we become okay with feeling the full range of them. The emotions no longer disturb us as much, just as they don't truly disturb children. Children can move right into their feelings and emerge again naturally. We're rediscovering that same quality—allowing ourselves to feel fully while trusting that the emotion will pass on its own.

As we touch the emotion of sadness deeply, opening to it as completely as possible, we hold no intention of changing it, making it disappear, or creating a project around releasing it. What's remarkable is that this complete acceptance returns us to the neighborhood of purity. It brings us back to ultimate truth because we've relaxed all our doing and strategizing. We've released all our concepts about the emotion and simply entered into this fully awake relationship with what is.

The purity doesn't deny the emotion. We discover this purity right in the heart of strong emotions. You might say the purity surrounds the emotion. This is truly miraculous—a miracle of practice. In ordinary daily life, we know only how to perpetuate emotions and wait for them to run their course. But in practice, we find that in the middle of intense emotion, we can rediscover our innate purity of mind, which is naturally awake, peaceful, and friendly.

When we make this connection with our deepest nature, the emotion begins to dissolve into that purity. There's a great Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj who taught in Bombay in the 1970s and 80s. He worked through dialogue. Once, a Westerner approached him saying, "I'm having difficulty with some

pain." Maharaj replied, "You need to accept it." The Westerner protested, "But pain is unacceptable. I can't accept it." Maharaj asked, "Why not? Did you ever really try? Do try, and you will find in pain a joy that pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its hopes and fears returns you to your true nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

This is the beautiful mingling of ultimate truth and conventional truth. The conventional truth is that I, as a particular person with a specific history, accumulated disappointment that is now being touched by this force of purity. This story isn't untrue—there's genuine truth in this narrative. But freedom comes through a deeper dimension than the story reveals. This freedom emerges by moving beyond concepts to the ultimate layer beneath.

The ultimate truth asks: What's happening in this very moment? What occurs when awareness meets the experience of sadness right now? There are bodily sensations connected with the feeling. There's a mental tone of sadness, and thoughts arise and pass away. The breath, too, comes and goes.

Sounds are arising and passing. Other sensations in the body are coming and going. This is what's really happening in the moment. This, in a way, is the truth—the real truth of this moment. Not the story. This is the real truth of this moment.

And when we start to see in this way, we're starting to see a little bit of emptiness. We're starting to see without the fixed center of things, the owner, the self, the project of healing that's coagulated around the experience of sadness. This is very freeing. This is where the freedom lies in relationship to the sadness. It's not that the sadness has to go away; it's that it gets held by this purity of awareness, of steadiness, of friendliness, of acceptance.

This ultimate truth, which we talked about as our Buddha nature, is quite impersonal. It's pretty much the same for every one of us. But the conventional truth is quite personal. The reason my sadness got lodged there may have been because I lost something very precious when I was six years old and I was never allowed to cry about it fully at the time. That's a really personal story.

And the way that the practice unfolds often is this impersonal force of purity starts to expand and grow until it hits these personal pockets of holding. And as the personal is held by the impersonal, the personal gets released. And as it does that, a lot of the old holding and even the story and the personality get loosened up. And that's why when you see masters, meditation masters, there's very little sense of past for them.

You know, the Buddha didn't go out and teach once he was awakened and say, "What you want to know about me is I was born a prince in a kingdom in northern India, and I had a lot of fun when I was a kid, and my guardians taught me archery." That's not what the Buddha was interested in talking about. He

talked about the way things are, the nature of things. But the personal is also significant.

Bringing the flower in tonight reminds me of the story you may have heard before of what's called the flower sermon, which was supposedly the start of the Zen tradition. And the story is that the Buddha held up a flower in front of a whole assembly of monks and nuns and practitioners, held up a flower and didn't say a word. And nobody got it except one person, who was Mahakashyapa. And Mahakashyapa got it and just acknowledged to the Buddha that he'd gotten it. And that was the end of the flower sermon and the start of the Zen tradition.

As soon as I heard that story, I knew I was going to have some trouble with Zen—which I think is why I ended up in Vipassana. But I think that teaching is really a pointer to the union of the conventional and the ultimate that is symbolized by the flower.

In one way, this flower is not different from any other flower. It's got a stem, it's got leaves, it's got petals, it's got stamen and pistils to propagate itself. There's the reproduction theme again. It's not different from any other flower. And yet, as you look at it—I think this is a carnation, it's not a rose—it's like a rose in a lot of ways, but it's not a rose. If you look at the beauty of this flower, it's very individual. It's really unique. And this personal uniqueness of its expression is what's called in tradition its suchness. But at the same time, you know that that suchness is underlain by its emptiness. Its individuality is just made up of different arrangements of common components.

So that's like that with each one of us. Someone is a rose, someone's a carnation, someone's a gardenia. We all have different fragrances and scents and individual beauties. In that way, the path, the unfolding is quite personal. But the components that we're all made up of are the same. Sadness, fear, joy, happiness, compassion, equanimity.

So it's not really quite right to say that we're the same person, because a rose isn't the same as a carnation. But it's also not quite right to say we're really different, because we're basically the same package, just little variations in the mix. So maybe the terms "same" and "different" don't apply between you and me. Maybe our relationship is in some other dimension than that. We're not the same, we're not different. This is not just idle philosophical mind play.

But when you really start to get the sense that we're not different, you get in touch with this poem by Rumi's master, who was a Sufi called Shams of Tabriz. Not many poems have come down from Rumi's teacher, but this is one:

I, you, he, she, we.
In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions.

In the garden of clear seeing, these are not true distinctions either. So the insight into the emptiness of things, the ultimate truth of things, takes away the barriers. It takes away the differences that concepts have created. And we understand that our basic nature, the nature of reality for you, is exactly the same

as the nature of reality for me. But at the same time, we're different flowers. And there's an individuality that's also true, the level of conventional truth.

As we connect with this sadness and we reestablish the contact with purity, then it's really important not to lose our mindfulness. And this often happens. As people start to experience the purity, the mindfulness goes blank. And it's actually a lot easier to be mindful with difficulty than it is with ease. Because what happens is we start to think, "Oh, this is the way it's supposed to be. Now I'm back in purity. Oh, this is what's supposed to be happening." And then we take it for granted.

Instead of seeing, "Oh, this is the wholesome state of mind. This is mindfulness. This is peace. This is equanimity. This is ease." So as you touch these cycles of purity in your practice, it's really, really important to notice those states of mind just as much as you notice the difficult. Because if you don't notice that they're there, you're going to think your practice is all about the difficult.

In fact, these moments of peace are coming in many, many times during the day. All we have to do is wake up and notice them. But if we're not alert, if we're going to sleep because we take them for granted, we won't ever notice that they're there.

Also this idea, "this is the way things are supposed to be," is delusional. There is no way things are supposed to be. There's only the way things are. Things are the way they are because of past causes and conditions. There's no other way they could be. So this idea that there's some way they're supposed to be is a fiction. There is no way that things are supposed to be.

The Buddha's reference point was emptiness. It wasn't a concept of how things are supposed to be. Emptiness really means the understanding that nothing is there from the beginning. Nothing is there all the time. No state of mind is intrinsically and always present. So anything that appears is interesting. Anything that appears is different from emptiness, different from nothing there from the beginning.

So we notice the wholesome, we notice the positive, and we trust in that. And the more we can relax and trust in this positivity, the more we have the engine that carries the journey and can carry it all the way, all the way to liberation. Many beautiful unfoldings along the way. Healing happens. Concentration happens. Insight happens. Extraordinary openings. Joy and love come along the path. But the Buddha said, don't stop at any of those.

I just want to close with this quote from a sutta called The Simile of the Heartwood from the Majjhima Nikaya, that describes the Buddha's view of the purpose of this unfolding:

This holy life does not have gain, honor, and renown for its end. It doesn't have virtue for its end. It doesn't have concentration for its end. It doesn't have knowledge and vision for its end.

But it is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the purpose of this holy life, its end and its completion.

This unshakable deliverance of mind—this is what we're really after. Not the pleasant states along the

way, not even the profound insights or the deep peace, but this complete freedom that cannot be touched by the changing conditions of life. This is liberation itself.

The path unfolds naturally when we understand this distinction. We can enjoy the jhanas, appreciate the insights, feel gratitude for the peace and clarity that come with practice. But we don't mistake these for the destination. They are like beautiful rest stops on a journey—wonderful to experience, but not where we're ultimately headed.

When we grasp after these intermediate experiences, when we try to possess them or make them permanent, we create suffering. But when we recognize them as part of the unfolding toward complete freedom, we can receive them with appreciation while remaining unattached.

This unshakable deliverance of mind is available to each of us. It's not reserved for special people or those with particular gifts. It's the natural result of following this path with patience, consistency, and understanding. The Buddha's teaching points directly to this possibility—not as something to believe in, but as something to discover for ourselves.

Let's just sit for a minute in the silence that points toward this freedom.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.