Transcendent Dependent Origination

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 58:46

I spoke to you last week about the seven factors of enlightenment, that description of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind that we develop on this path and that lead us towards liberation.

I'd like to speak tonight about another list that is in some ways similar to the seven factors, but has quite a different unfolding and is quite powerful in the breadth and scope that it offers to us. What's interesting about comparing these two lists is recognizing that they represent just one of many ways in which the Buddha described the unfolding of our path. This shows us there's not one way that this might happen. There's not one set formula of sequential experiences that then lead to liberation. The Buddha was a very skillful teacher, and he saw that each of us has our own unique set of characteristics and responds in different ways to experience, so he offered a variety of paths and processes that describe the sequence of awakening.

This teaching is called transcendent dependent arising, or transcendental dependent origination—you can see different translations of it. It's a very inspiring teaching, but it's actually not that common in the suttas; it only appears a couple of times. Because of its breadth and scope, I find it very inspiring and uplifting for the range of experiences it encompasses and the trajectory it shows us is possible.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the preeminent Pali scholars of our day who is currently translating nearly all of the Pali canon into beautiful English, considers this a tremendously important sutta, even though it's somewhat rare. One of the reasons he considers it so, and I agree, is that it begins with our current condition. It begins with where we're caught, where we struggle, and shows us a way out of that struggle to the greatest depths of liberation. It doesn't begin assuming that we're already in a great place. It says, no, right here and now in the difficulties of our life, in the torments of mind, we can actually find a path that will lead us to greater and greater freedom.

This is also a teaching about the conditioned nature of our experience. It shows us, as we've been emphasizing throughout this retreat, how nothing arises independently. Things arise out of causes and conditions. If we can begin to understand that process, we're not then a victim of it. We can actually have input into those causes and conditions and change the trajectory if we bring mindfulness in, if we bring wisdom in. This teaching lets us know that through clarity of intention and wisdom, we can be an active participant in the unfolding of our spiritual path and practice.

The particular way this list unfolds that I'm going to speak about tonight is from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Upanisā Sutta. As I said, it's a teaching of conditionality. It's important to remember when you hear or read teachings of conditionality, of cause and effect, that what is happening here is a conditioning process.

Even though it's cause and effect, it doesn't mean it's a literal process in the sense that A always means B will happen next. What conditioning actually means is that when A is like this, B is like this or like that—the first factor influences the next factor. It doesn't cause it to happen.

It's really important to get this distinction because we can become both blaming and expectant if we think it should be happening in a particular way or shouldn't be happening in a particular way. So it's a conditioning process. In this list, for example, the first two links are suffering and faith. The teaching is that when suffering is like this, faith is like this. When we understand suffering in this way, faith can arise and have a certain effect on us. It's conditioning, not directly causal in the sense that if this happens, that happens.

This teaching of conditionality is a strong factor in another teaching that many of you may be aware of called dependent origination. Andrea is going to talk more about some aspects of this profound teaching tomorrow night, so I'll just refer to it in the sense that it relates to this teaching on transcendent dependent origination.

Dependent origination, briefly, is a description of twelve links that begin with ignorance, lead us through craving and becoming, all forms of attachment and self-identification, into more suffering. Then because we haven't seen through the cause of that suffering, we're immediately back in ignorance and the cycle just continues. It's really a description of us being caught on the wheel of suffering, caught in the cycle of saṃsāra—an endless trajectory when we don't recognize it, don't understand what's happening. This teaching of transcendent dependent arising actually emerges from the understanding of dependent origination.

So transcendent dependent arising is just another map, another way for us to understand our unfolding. I spoke last week about maps and how they can be both useful but also sometimes misleading. I love maps and love to understand where I am in a new environment. One of the things I've done since I've come here is learn more about where I am than some people who've lived here for twenty years, because I like to go out and find maps and explore. I actually got another map last week—I was in a little local store and they just had on the counter a little book that said something like "Twelve Easy Walks Around Barre." I thought, sounds great.

Picked up this book and we decided to go for a walk on our day off a few days ago. I chose from this book what I thought was a very simple walk, taking into account the capacities of my companions—not naming anyone. I thought, you know, it says "easy." If it says easy in this book, it must be easy, because one of the walks in the book is walking around the track at the local high school. So that's kind of the beginning of easy in this book.

But as you know, the hardest part of orienting yourself on any map description is finding the starting point. Have you ever had that problem? You get to the basic area, but you can't find the important point—where do you begin from? And of course, at first we were driving and we missed the beginning.

We went way past it and had to backtrack to find where we were meant to start from.

So we found it—we were pretty sure we'd found it, but you're never 100% confident. We head down this trail, and we're meant to take a right-hand turn. It says, "after less than half a mile." So we're getting a sense of the distance, and a little way down the path, we see a left-hand turn. We go, no, that's not it. We want a right-hand turn. So we keep going.

It gets to at least about half a mile, and the whole track—we're on like a fire road—turns right. There's a little trail off to the left. We're all going, well, we're meant to turn right, but it says it's a turn, not that the whole trail goes. But maybe this is it. We hadn't seen anything else. So we keep going, we just turn, and we follow.

Then it says there should be a swamp on your left. We go, well, there's a little patch of water over there. Maybe this is the swamp. We're reading the description of the path, which is quite detailed. Then you go up a little rise. There's a pine tree. Yes, a little rise. So we're trying to convince ourselves that we're on this right path, matching the directions in the book—because it's one of those that just has the outline of the path and nothing to put it in any context. We're going further and further, and the similarity between the description and what's happening is getting further and further apart. But we're reluctant to admit that we've gone the wrong way.

I especially keep going. Maybe it's this little crossing here—is this the dike that we're meant to be crossing? Just see how we're trying to fit our experience into what it says in the book. And I even commented at the time, this is really like meditation, where you get some ideas in your head and you have an experience. Maybe this is it, isn't it? It feels like this and it looks like that. Am I having this experience? It was really like that.

But after a while, where it really got different and we were passing under transmission lines and coming to T-intersections, even I had to admit that I think we were lost. And I hate going back. We'd been sort of turning right, so I kept thinking, well, maybe we'll just go in a circle. If we keep walking, we'll come back. My companions very wisely said, no, we're not going in the right direction.

So we turned around and met some other hikers who said, oh, you needed to turn off way back there. And as soon as they said it, I realized where we'd gone wrong. When there was that left turn, we needed to look across the path, and there was the right-hand turn that we'd missed. But because we were looking left, we didn't see it and we kept going. And as we went back, I looked—we all looked to find it—and there it was, as clear as day.

This is what can happen if we have some idea in our head, or if the information we have is limited to just this linear process. So what I'm trying to emphasize in telling this story is not to take these teachings as some absolute: this is the way it should look, if you get to here, this is what happens next. They're really just suggestions about possibilities. What's most important to take from them is not to zoom in one

direction thinking this is what should happen.

But to understand possibilities and factors of mind and heart that can be cultivated, and what's actually really supportive in your practice and needs to be enlivened to allow this development to happen. So it really is much more about possibilities rather than any sense of limitation or constriction.

My understanding of this also comes from the fact that, as I said, there are many of these kinds of lists in the suttas where the Buddha talks about how the path unfolds, and they're quite different. They'll have some similar moments, and then they'll diverge. So each of us will find a teaching or a practice or a way that works for us, or at different times find ourselves connecting with a certain map or unfolding and can use that—but not to be constricted by it, not to just think that this is the only way it can happen.

Because we don't want to get caught up in the idea of journey and goal. Then it can get kind of future or outward-oriented: "This is where I am here, stuck in suffering, and I have to get there, wherever that is." And it doesn't allow us to fully be right where we are.

It's often that the spiritual journey is depicted as kind of an outward movement—the classic description of the seeker putting on their backpack and heading out into the wilderness, the hermit going out to the hut somewhere. We think there has to be this movement, physical movement outwards. This archetype has actually been co-opted by cartoonists. If you've noticed, there's now a plethora of what we call the guru cartoons, and I've taken to collecting them because there's this whole archetype of cartoons. The classic is the guru on the mountaintop outside a cave, and he's got a long beard and a little loincloth or something on, and someone has just crept up the mountaintop and has obviously just asked the question. You have to assume it's something like, "What is the meaning of life?" One of the ones I saw recently has the guru responding to this person: "I'll make a deal with you. I'll tell you the secret of life if you tell me how to program my VCR." Actually, you can tell it's old—now it would be how to program my TiVo. That's even more complicated.

But it's not about having to get from here and go there. In teaching about these kinds of processes, it's really an inner unfoldment, a very natural development that only arises out of a deep and profound connection to being where we are right now. So I'm not wanting to put it out there as some sense of this is what you should be striving for or this is where you have to go, but really as a much broader view than that—a view of possibilities.

Because even as they're presented linearly, as I was saying last week, they don't work in that way optimally. There are many feedback loops. They're not so discrete often, the different steps. So you really have to use them as skillful means, not as something definitive.

But there is this sense of development. This is a path of development, where we really see the places of constriction, the places of delusion that keep us bound, and open to the possibility of greater clarity, greater freedom, greater happiness.

This process of deepening can only happen if we're willing to keep connecting again and again with our experience. So the forward movement isn't actually forward at all. It's staying present over and over again with what's happening to us here and now in this moment. What's really happening in that is continuity—a continuity of awareness. It's what, again, we've been talking about a lot over the days of the retreat. And you can really feel the power of that. For those of you that have been here for many weeks or even just a few weeks, feel the power of that continuity.

And to really see for yourself how, if any thoughts of ending of the retreat—as far away as that might be, in the real world out there it's weeks away, for most people would be the longest retreat they've ever been on—but if we have that sense of "Oh, end is nearly here, I'm nearly finished," practice will stall. Because we put an end to that willingness to connect. We're leaning out into the future. So to use these teachings and the opportunity we have of being here for these many more weeks, to really stay present and to see what's possible to cultivate in our hearts and minds in the greater, greater depths of freedom.

As I said, this teaching arises out of the wheel of dependent origination, these twelve links that begin with ignorance, describe sort of the human condition of having a mind and a body and all of the senses, the place we get caught in the vedana—the pleasant, unpleasantness, or neutrality of experience—into craving and then clinging. And we just go round and round.

When I was thinking about this—you know, it's often depicted as a wheel—and thinking of all the things that go around, it could be like a bicycle wheel turning. What I thought was that it is possible to break that wheel. That's how we discover freedom. And we can break it in a moment. It's kind of like sticking a stick or something in the spokes of a bicycle wheel as it's going around. If you do that, it just jams to a stop. But unfortunately what happens is we're there, we've stopped it, the wheel has ended, there's freedom in that moment. And then we go, "Oh, but there's that." And we let go of whatever it was that stopped the wheel.

It's not a perfect analogy, but I'll go with it. We move on to the next thing that's caught our attention or that we're worried about. And there's such momentum in the wheel that it just starts up again. Then maybe we find another place where we stop that wheel, we stick something in the spokes. But the momentum is so strong.

I also thought of a Catherine wheel—you know, those fireworks that are somehow arranged in a circle, and the fireworks come out at one end so it spins around and around. The reason that made sense to me is because I think of transcendent dependent arising as opposed to a wheel. It's like those fireworks that go up and then just dissolve—those beautiful clouds of color and light that are so real and so alive and brilliant, but then they just flicker out.

This is the potential of this teaching, of transcendent dependent origination. It's a one-way street, in a sense. If you begin on this path, this is where it heads—to the highest liberation, to the complete freedom and emptiness that's possible.

Unfortunately, it's not that quick for most of us. I think it's actually a bit more like another analogy I thought of. If you know that circus game—I've never played it, but it's often in cartoons I would see when I was growing up. In circuses or sideshows, they would call it Ring the Bell. It's the arcade game where there's a platform and a big bell, and you have a big mallet, and you have to hit the thing. How strong you are determines how far up it goes, up this rope or something. And if you hit it really strongly, you ring the bell, and that's like you've won the prize.

I kind of think of transcendent dependent arising like that. Here we are hitting our bell—and plop, plop. It just goes back again. Next time, maybe a little higher. Sometime we'll get it right. We'll hit that thing and boing, out it'll go. But for most of us, we don't make it the whole way today or whenever.

But not to think of it that way. I put out that analogy, but it's not that great. And it's not like, "Oh, we have to get there, this is what it's all about." Because every movement of exploration of this process is actually creating this amazing foundation for our practice and our lives. No movement in this direction is wasted, even if there might be a sense of perhaps not being in such a rarefied state as you were yesterday or three weeks ago—whenever your peak experience that you think it was might have been.

Again, the image is like climbing a mountaintop. You make all the effort to get there, and when you get to the top, there's this amazing view. But you can't live up there. So you go back down, but you've seen that view. You've seen that possibility. It rewires something in the brain. Something shifts. This is what these kinds of teachings show us.

I also think it's—I don't know why I had all these analogies for this—it's not like climbing a ladder where as you climb, you let go of the rung below. It's more like stairs that have bulk on them, like those Japanese staircases where you're actually creating something as you go.

It's a process. The main thing is not to think of it as being about the destination but about the journey. And what this teaching does is show us that there is a wisdom to the unfolding that we experience.

Sometimes all we want is to ring that bell. We're just going to keep banging on that thing until we ring it. And this teaching says, no, you can't just wail away at it. You've got to put in the groundwork that develops these beautiful states of heart and mind—joy, happiness, tranquility. From that foundation, the opening can happen. There's a lot of wisdom here. This foundation of well-being is necessary for us to open to these deeper and more challenging experiences and practices.

So that's my introduction. I haven't even started. There are twelve links to go.

The list begins with suffering. And that's why we can all relate, I think. Suffering. Then faith, joy, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are, disenchantment, dispassion, emancipation, knowledge and destruction of the taints.

It's quite an amazing list that begins right here with where we're struggling and moves through these

beautiful qualities of mind and heart, then has this turning towards liberation and away from being caught in the things of the world, culminating in final and complete emancipation.

Its connection to dependent origination is with this first link of suffering. Because it's a wheel, you can't really say an ending, but suffering is the twelfth link that then goes on to ignorance and starts again. Transcendent dependent origination—this is the fireworks thing. It goes off from suffering into the unknown, the wild blue yonder.

Suffering is the first noble truth. Guy talked for a whole evening about it, so it's something we've been bringing into our practice, bringing into our mindfulness—this opening to the truth of suffering. But it's a noble truth, the noble truth of suffering. And it's a really interesting question: What makes it noble? Why noble? What's noble about suffering?

Good friend and colleague Gil Fronsdal asked this question and said that it becomes noble when you find a path in it—when you actually understand the suffering and see that there's a way out, that there's a cause of suffering and therefore an end of suffering. As Ajahn Chah says, there's the kind of suffering that leads to more suffering and the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering. This is the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering, when we understand it and see there's a possibility of finding a way out.

The Buddha, of course, was the one who discovered this path. When he was on his journey, he had no teacher or guide. All he had was his suffering and a conviction that it was possible to end the suffering. He went from living a very luxurious life to seeing so clearly, with great vividness, the suffering and challenge of life. He hadn't known about old age, sickness, and death, and when he saw those as truths that were true for him as they were for everyone, he was so shocked he needed to find a way out. That propelled him on his journey.

But for this teaching to arise or this process to happen, something has to shift in our relationship to suffering. In dependent origination, we're just lost in the suffering, in the usual scheme of things. We're resisting it, kicking and screaming, coming up with strategies, trying to hold on to things, trying to push other things away. It's this endless struggle to try and get away from or out of suffering, and it just keeps us going on that cycle.

For the process of transcendent dependent arising to happen, something has to shift in our relationship to suffering. What has to happen is we have to apply the teachings of the First Noble Truth.

There is suffering. And the practice or the imperative that comes with that is suffering is to be understood. We need to understand this process of suffering and why it comes about and see for ourselves, even though we're not perhaps fully or completely experiencing it, see the possibility that there is an end to suffering, there is a way out of suffering. This is what has to happen for this shift to take place.

And all of us have made that shift. We wouldn't be here on retreat if we didn't have that belief that it's

possible to end suffering, to diminish suffering, to find greater freedom. Otherwise, we'd just be lost in suffering. We'd be suffering in a different way out there in the world, choosing to suffer in this unique way here on retreat.

So we see that when we have this different relationship to suffering, what's actually being evoked in us is the next factor, the next stage, and that is faith. Suffering, when the wisdom factor comes in, when we're on the path, leads to faith. It's an interesting movement there, that the actual experience of suffering is what brings us onto the path because we see the possibility of the end of suffering.

Carol talked beautifully last night about faith, so I won't say too much more about it, but because it's so important to this list, because of this transition out of being lost in suffering and going around and around on that wheel, it's faith that breaks that trance, that opens this new set of possibilities. So it's really very central to this process.

I can remember in my early years of practice, I also started with Christopher Titmuss. Faith wasn't much talked about. It was really do it for yourself, see it for yourself, forget all of the trappings of Buddhism, and just sit and be mindful. Or walk and be mindful, or live and be mindful, but just do it for yourself.

Having practiced now for a long time, I've really seen that faith is central, that unless we have some sense of both faith in ourselves and our own capacity to awaken, but also faith in possibilities that we haven't yet opened to, faith in the example of others, faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, it's very hard to really deepen and develop on the path. So faith can be quite central.

I can remember my first retreat in India in the early eighties. It was actually with S.N. Goenka, and I really didn't have a clue what I was doing. It was incredibly difficult, but I can remember so clearly the thought coming again and again: "Oh, it doesn't have to be this way. I don't have to keep perpetuating my suffering and through that causing suffering to others." And it was such a revelation.

I can also remember on that first retreat having a vision. I'm not someone who normally has visions. I'm a very down-to-earth kind of person, so this was a little unusual, and I still remember it. In the vision, I was sitting looking out and I saw Jesus in front of me. Jesus was kind of walking away from me but turning around towards me and beckoning. And when I looked beyond Jesus, what he was beckoning to was the Buddha sitting there. It was just a lovely invitation, an evocation of a path, and an inclusion and a welcoming. It was quite inspiring to me.

I went to Goenka and said, "What does this mean?" He said, "Don't think about it. It doesn't matter." But I actually found it quite enlivening. And why it came up for me, I would forget about it at times, but a number of years ago Guy and I went to teach a retreat in Perth, Australia, where I'm from—not from Perth, I'm from Australia—and it was in a rented facility, as these retreats often are. It was a Catholic retreat center, so there were lots of crucifixes and pictures of Jesus around, not many Buddhas.

But the retreat managers had set up this nice altar with the Buddha sitting behind us. When I first went to

take my seat up on the teaching platform with the Buddha behind me, I looked out at all the people, and it wasn't as big a room as this, so not that far away on a far wall was a portrait of Jesus. It was one of those seventies portraits of Jesus where he's very handsome, he could be a movie star, blonde hair and beard—he looked like a surfer almost. But it was a glass portrait of Jesus. So as I looked at him, right in front of me, what was reflected was the image of the Buddha.

That vision I had was replicated as I sat there, now in the teaching position. It was just an amazing moment for me when I think of all of the confusion and doubt and unfounded optimism that I had about my practice at that time twenty, thirty years ago, whenever it was, to now really sitting in a place of such faith in the teachings. It was a beautiful moment to realize the possibility of just being on the path and where it can lead.

So we often begin with what's called blind faith, where there's just a sense that other people have told us this is good, this is a good thing to do. Your first retreat is often out of blind faith. You have no experience yourself. It was that way for me. I was beginning to read about Buddhism.

I was in McLeod Ganj, where many Tibetans lived, and someone simply said to me, "If you want to learn about meditation, go and do this retreat." And so I took myself off. I didn't have a clue where I was going. I had to find the place, which was very difficult. I didn't know the teacher, didn't know anyone else going there, and yet I had this amazing experience. But it was really blind faith that got me there.

Then we develop what's called bright faith. Bright faith is where something has really been awakened in us. We've heard the teachings, we see that possibility—and that's what I had on my first retreat. "Oh, it doesn't have to be like this." Something has shifted, but it's not yet very established.

Then we move to what's called verified faith. That's where we know for ourselves. We've had experiences of letting go, of opening, of transformation, of greater happiness or freedom. We're on the path. It is what we do, what we know, what we love, and what we treasure. And this can lead on to even unshakable faith, where whatever challenges might come up, whatever might happen, the faith remains steady.

Carol told the story the other night about Suppabuddha, the leper. Part of that story is that as he's hearing the Buddha—if you remember, the Buddha recognizes that he's a person who can truly listen—someone tests him after he's heard the Dhamma and awakened. They say, "Suppabuddha, you're a miserable wretch, a leper. I'll give you all this money if you say the teachings are false." And Suppabuddha says, "How can you call me a miserable wretch? I have the Dhamma, and I wouldn't give it up for all the money in the world." That's unshakable faith. That's what can happen.

Sharon Salzberg has written a beautiful book about faith, very personal and moving, about her experience in the development of faith. She says, "I want to encourage delight in the word, to reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating. This is a faith that emphasizes a foundation of love and respect for ourselves."

This is what's possible, and we see it for ourselves, experiencing directly the benefits of this practice and this path. The Buddha said, "Faith is the beginning of all good things." In faith there is an uplift in the heart. As I mentioned, *saddhā* is the Pali word, and it literally means "to put one's heart upon." It's a very heartfelt quality.

This leads to the next factor of joy, or *pāmojja*. So we have suffering leading to faith, and faith and the uplift that comes from it leading to joy. Part of this progression is that as we're more and more connected to the path, we feel the benefits. Just out of faith and seeing the possibilities for ourselves, joy can naturally arise.

Pāmojja is sometimes translated as gladness or delight. It's said to come out of a diminishment of the hindrances—as those difficult states of mind diminish, what we experience, what becomes possible for us, is this beautiful quality of joy or delight. But it's not a joy that's directed outwards. It can include that, but it is definitely an inner experience of well-being and contentment, where we're free of worry and restlessness, all of the different ways the hindrances can manifest. We discover appreciation, gratitude, and contentment.

It's actually becoming quite a popular practice these days to deliberately cultivate joy. We did the *muditā* practice the other night, and I hope you felt some of the benefits of deliberately turning the mind and heart to this beautiful quality. With that inclination of the mind, we do cultivate that experience.

James Baraz, a good friend and teacher, has been offering these "Awakening Joy" classes for a couple of years now. He's had hundreds and hundreds of people attend them, either in person or online—monthly teachings about awakening this quality of joy in our lives. It's been amazing to see the effect it's had on his students and how the deliberate paying attention to what brings joy cultivates joy. We sort of know this, but we never follow through because we get distracted or something else seems more important.

I recently received a quote from one of the participants in James's class who said, "I have an increased awareness of joyfulness and the possibility of cultivating it."

I also understand better how to experience it rather than the old random way of simply being surprised or, even worse, unaware of its presence. I now practice choosing to see joy—the joy inherent in many situations—rather than the negative or painful aspects.

So we can actually cultivate this quality and see it as a really necessary and wholesome factor on the path.

In the sequence comes next a couple of factors that I've already spoken about, so I won't go into them too much. From suffering, which leads to faith, which leads to joy, comes rapture or *pīti* that I spoke about. It's one of the factors of enlightenment, that rapt attention in the meditation object that allows the mind to become absorbed and interested in what's happening.

And then, in the same part of the sequence as the seven factors, it leads to tranquility or *passaddhi*—calmn

ess, that natural movement when the energy balances out of the rapture. When the mind is absorbed in the object, the experience can be calmness or tranquility, often a lack of thought, a settledness in the process.

Out of tranquility comes happiness or *sukha*. This is not a bubbly kind of happiness, not la-di-da skipping around, because you can see the preceding factor is tranquility. Tranquility infuses the happiness. Steve Armstrong has a beautiful description of *sukha*—he calls it happy contentment of mind and body. It really is a sense of well-being in this kind of happiness, a softness, a sweetness, very delightful.

And happiness, this kind of meditative happiness, leads us on to the next factor of concentration, *samādhi*. What's interesting is that the proximate cause—and that's what the preceding factor is in these kinds of lists—the proximate cause of *samādhi* or concentration is not effort or striving or hours on the cushion or breaking your knees just to sit a bit longer. It's *sukha* or happiness.

Really helpful to remember the next time you're gritting your teeth and saying, "No, no, no, I have to sit longer or harder or more," or whatever your definition of striving is. It's actually contentment, happiness that develops the kind of *samādhi* that's helpful in this progression.

And so what we're talking about in this context of our practice for *samādhi* is not necessarily deep states of absorption. There is that in *samādhi*, but all we need to develop is successive moments of mindfulness, continuous mindfulness. That's the kind of *samādhi* that leads to this connecting to our experience, to this sense of presence, undistractedness. The mind is responsive and what we call malleable—there's not a lot of distractions. The hindrances have been let go of. There's a sense of joy and happiness in the practice. And so the mind is just fully present for what is.

What the mind can do then is open to insight. And this is always what *samādhi* is in service of—to lead us deeper into insight. The link here in this list from concentration goes to how they define insight as knowledge and vision of things as they are. Knowledge and vision of things as they are, the turn to insight. So we let go of the *samādhi* and that sense of protectedness and start to look directly at our experience, see what's happening. See the way things are.

And we've talked about what we see when we look in this way. Joseph spoke the other night about this clarity of seeing that sees beyond concepts to the true nature of things. We see the selfless nature, the impermanent nature of things. We see how things are conditioned. And it's not just a superficial seeing. As we say, you could go out and ask anyone, "Sure, things are changing." But we see it in a deep way. Knowledge and vision means not intellectual. We really see truly, deeply for ourselves. We see the inherent unreliability of experience, the unsatisfactoriness of experience.

And then comes another interesting turn. So we've taken this concentrated mind, we've opened it to look clearly at the nature of our experience, and seeing the impermanence, the selfless nature, the conditioned nature leads to the next factor, which is disenchantment, *nibbidā*. Joseph spoke about this either in a Q&A

or in his talk the other night. Disenchantment—breaking the spell, the illusion that we usually live in and under.

Often this Pali word *nibbidā* was translated as revulsion or disgust. And one would get to this part of the list and think, "Hmm, joy, happiness, tranquility, and then what? Revulsion, disgust? I don't want that. I don't want to be revulsed by my experience or disgusted by it." And I was always a little concerned about that myself. It didn't seem like it was really meeting the experience and fully connecting with it and allowing me to open to it.

Andy Olendzki, who's a scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies just down the road, wrote a great paper on this, a very short paper, but I found it so helpful. He looked really into the etymology of this term and could see more clearly what was meant by *nibbidā*. He said that the literal meaning is "without finding." And he tells this story from the suttas of how it's talked about:

There is a story in the text that usefully illustrates the meaning of this most important of terms. A dog stumbles across a bone that has been exposed to the elements for many months and is therefore bleached of any residual flesh or marrow.

The dog gnaws on it for some time before he finally determines that he is not finding any satisfaction in the bone, and thus he turns away from it in disgust. It is not that the bone is intrinsically disgusting. It is rather the case that the dog's raging desire for meat just will not be satisfied by this bone. He is enchanted by the prospect of gratification as he scrapes away furiously at the bone. But when he finally wakes up to the truth that the bone is empty of anything that will offer him satisfaction, he becomes disenchanted and spits it out in disgust.

So it's really important what's being said here. It's not the object that's disgusting. It's this natural movement of mind as we see the inherent impossibility of objects to give us lasting satisfaction. The kind of happiness that this teaching offers to us can't be found in the objects of the world or in transitory experiences. And there's this natural turning away. This is what nibbida is. It's something where we let go easily of whatever the entrancement was. It no longer has the appeal. It's not disgusting. We're not pushing it away out of aversion.

I was trying to think of good analogies for this, and I came up with a rather extreme example. Remember when you were—if you were like me—ten or twelve years old and you'd come home from school, what was a good source of happiness for you? For me, it was to watch about two hours of television. Old reruns of Gilligan's Island and cartoons and Get Smart. I'm talking to a certain age group here, I'm sure, but you can imagine—that was happiness. Now imagine if someone said, "You get to watch two hours of television." Would you find happiness in that, satisfaction in that? It would just be, "No, I don't want to do that anymore. I used to find happiness in it. Now I no longer do." That's nibbida.

Another small analogy. We don't often give you much news here, but I'll tell you something. Today is Black

Friday. I don't know if you have any memory of what that means. Black Friday is the day after Thanksgiving that's considered to be the busiest shopping day of the year. The media and stores all join together to hype this by having outrageous sales—a television for fifty dollars, ten cents for something. People line up for hours to get these deals on stuff. So today, that's what was happening out there. Do you have any interest in joining Black Friday? What would you feel like if we dropped you in Hampshire Mall right now? That's nibbida. That's turning away from something that, for some people, brings extreme happiness. It was on the web today—one guy said, "If they're selling it, we're buying it." That's the mind state. Bargains. It doesn't matter if you wanted it or not. It's cheap, so you buy it.

Out of nibbida, what nibbida brings is a sense of letting go, yes. But it arises from a sense that there's something so much better on offer here. So there's this turning that's very natural and wise. And it leads naturally to the next step: dispassion.

From nibbida, disenchantment—not finding—to dispassion, viraga. Raga is usually translated as passion or lust. So viraga is the ending of passion, lust, or desire. This is the stage of the path, of this process, where it actually becomes transcendent.

Remember all the previous links. They're very much in our relationship to the relative world, to our emotional life, to a sense of well-being, beginning with suffering and faith—these relative qualities.

And there's this moment here where we turn out of nibbida, out of disenchantment. There's just a natural letting go of that movement of the mind, of greed and aversion, of holding on, seeing again that that's not where happiness is found. Another classic way of talking about this is turning to the deathless—inclining the mind, knowing that there (and it's not like there's a *there* there, but to make a relative thing)... that's not going to do it for me. Really seen for myself out of this place of happiness and contentment, knowing that these beautiful qualities are only cultivated through clear seeing, not through getting or having any particular experience.

And so we turn in this direction of letting go more and more. This dispassion is what leads to the next quality, the next factor: liberation, vimutti.

Out of that deep letting go, the mind opens and awakens. As the Buddha said, the practitioner understands as it really is: This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the path to the cessation of suffering. These are the taints—the taints are basically the defilements. This is the origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the path to the cessation of the taints. The practitioner, knowing and seeing thus, the mind is liberated from the taint of sensuality, from the taint of existence, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated, the knowledge arises: It is liberated.

But it doesn't stop with liberation. This is just the eleventh of the steps. Then there's the actual reviewing knowledge, which often happens in the teachings: knowledge of the destruction of the taints, āsavakkhaya ñāṇa. It's a reviewing. And what is the power of that reviewing? It's unshakable then. There's no doubt.

The ending of greed, aversion, and delusion—uprooted, not to arise again. This is complete liberation that's being talked about here: the mind of an arahant. It shows what's possible for us as we continue on this path.

But not to hold this lofty goal—this lifetime, perhaps many lifetimes maybe—out there in the future. Where I find this teaching helpful, even if I'm only touching it to small degrees, is the importance of this cultivation of the wholesome qualities, but the willingness to recognize when there is that turning away and letting go. When there is a letting go of whatever you were caught in—aversion, wanting, doubt, or fear—to notice that. The ending of that, the ending of whatever difficulty—this is an important moment. This is where we're moving along that path. And sure, because the grounds are still there, the conditions are still there, they may arise again. But this noticing of the endings, of whatever constriction, is what will actually keep us moving along this amazing process of deeper and deeper liberation, deeper and deeper possibilities.

The Buddha was a human just like us. So many people just like us have walked this path and experienced this kind of liberation. It's possible for all of us.

But don't make it seem too complicated. You don't have to memorize this. You don't have to work out where you are on the path or become despondent because you don't think you're very far. Use it as inspiration in the practice. I taught this at the DPP, the Dedicated Practitioners Program that I'm involved in at Spirit Rock, and one of the students there so loved it. I was just really inspired by her inspiration. Every time I would speak to her, she would talk about how it uplifted her heart to open to this teaching and know it was possible.

We spend so much time with our difficulties. It's really important to remember how valuable the cultivation of these beautiful states of mind is—like joy and happiness and contentment and tranquility—that they're necessary on this path. And faith. Faith in your capacity to awaken.

The capacity is there in all of us. It's onward leading. We just need to take one step at a time, one breath at a time, one experience, one moment at a time.

As Ajahn Chah said—and this is such a great quote—if you let go a little, you get a little peace. You let go a lot, a lot of peace. Let go completely, complete peace.

Let's just sit for a moment.

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