Transcendent Dependent Arising: A Map of Practice

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:00:13

I think we've said a number of times how the Buddha taught about suffering and the end of suffering, and that he never just taught about suffering but always included in his teaching the possibility of the end of suffering—that this is something we can know and experience.

In his many teachings, he gave many variations or lists about both suffering and the end of suffering, and sometimes lists that included both. The Four Noble Truths is the classic concise example of his teaching, where he posited the noble truth of suffering: there is suffering, and the cause of suffering, but also that there's an end to suffering and a path that leads to the end of suffering.

Last week I spoke about dependent origination, which really is an explication of the first two of those truths, talking about suffering and the cause of suffering and how, because of ignorance, we get caught in this cycle of just repeating the same actions. Even though we think that somewhere out there is happiness, somewhere out there we're going to be free of our suffering, we're actually doing the very things that cause suffering to happen, and so we're caught.

Tonight I want to talk about a teaching that takes off from that teaching on dependent origination. I mentioned it briefly in a Q&A session the other day—it's called transcendent dependent origination or transcendental dependent arising, different translations of the term. At this point in the retreat, it's perhaps a time where we might be able to appreciate this teaching because it's somewhat complex. Again, it's a list of twelve causal conditioned links like dependent origination, but it expands the third noble truth, and in some ways the fourth. It's pointing to the ending of suffering and how we experience that for ourselves within our meditation practice.

The fourth noble truth that Greg spoke about last night really is a very practical understanding of the path that includes all aspects of our experience, including our relational aspects like action and livelihood and speech. This teaching, by contrast, is a particularly meditative unfolding. It's really depicting the journey of practice and deep meditation experience. And what's amazing about it is that it starts from suffering. It starts from the human condition, right where we often find ourselves. And step by step it shows how the path can unfold and lead to freedom.

This teaching is not found many times in the suttas, perhaps only a few times. But Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the great scholars of our age, says it's an incredibly important sutta. He has a very long and extensive article on it in Access to Insight if you get interested in it from this talk, and he discusses how important it

is and how it reflects the depth of the Buddha's understanding. It's called the Upanisa Sutta—the one I'm going to be referring to is found in the Samyutta Nikaya, though it's referred to in a few other places as well.

Like dependent origination, this is a list of twelve links that influence each other. And just as I said for dependent origination, when we see a list like that, it seems kind of linear and codified, like discrete, separate experiences. But just like dependent origination, it's actually not that way. This teaching is much more fluid. It's not time-bound. It doesn't tick along like the second hand of a clock. There are very different time frames involved here, and also ways in which the links loop back and feed each other. We go through this process many times.

Whereas dependent origination is a teaching of how we start with ignorance and end up in suffering—and because of the depth of the ignorance just keep repeating that same patterning again and again, caught in craving, caught in thinking that happiness is out there somewhere if we can just hold on to it hard enough or fast enough—this teaching starts off at that place of suffering, that place that recognizes life is difficult. The first noble truth: there is suffering. If we have a mind and a body, suffering will be inherent in that condition. But this teaching shows us the way out of suffering. It goes directly from suffering to the freedom that's possible.

We've talked about a number of teachings like this. I talked about the jhanic factors. Greg talked about the factors of enlightenment. And I know as a practitioner, I would certainly hear these kinds of talks and really shake my head and wonder what they were talking about, or why this was helpful. It can seem like teachers are just talking about things that don't apply to me or that I haven't experienced. But we don't give these talks to judge or evaluate practice, to have a sense of not being in a progression where you might feel, here I am and this feels good. It's actually more like a map.

I really like this analogy of these teachings as a map. It does help to locate ourselves, not in a fixed way, but just with a sense that there is an unfolding here. And if we know the terrain, we can perhaps direct our progress with a little more clarity or understanding. Just by naming these particular experiences, states of mind, places in practice, we can recognize them more clearly. And even though this is a teaching that goes from suffering all the way to complete awakening—and we're obviously here because we haven't had that experience yet—I think all of us will know some aspect of what it's pointing to. It gives confidence or encouragement that this can be known. These teachings and practices are available to us.

The Buddha himself said that if it wasn't possible, he wouldn't ask us to do it. But because it is possible, he asks us to undertake this practice to free the mind.

I think of these teachings as guidebooks. You know how when you're going to Italy or France or Cambodia, you might buy the Lonely Planet guidebook with all its sections telling you that if you're in this region or territory, don't miss this site, don't miss that experience? You really get a sense of what to look out for. Well, this is the Buddha's guidebook to the landscape of the mind and to the territory of freedom. If we

know what the signposts are, what to look out for, we can see how to incline the mind.

Even when we encounter things like the factors of enlightenment talking about rapture, and people wonder, "What do you mean, rapture? I haven't had any rapture. I don't know what rapture is." But all of us have had some experience in that realm. Standing out on the porch watching one of those beautiful sunsets—it seems like a while since we've had one—but you stand out there and you're just captivated. The mind is still, absorbed, and it's pleasurable. Or out in the woods when you see a butterfly or a bird or a mushroom that attracts your attention and you're so fascinated by it. That's a quality of rapture. We can know that for ourselves, and knowing it in that experience, we can understand how it might deepen in meditative experience.

So this teaching really is, as I said, showing the terrain of our practice—not to judge ourselves, but to illuminate possibilities and ways to incline the mind. Much of what I'll be emphasizing tonight is learning to notice wholesome states of mind when they are present, to see how they're onward leading, and to recognize that we can cultivate them. The practice of the Brahma Viharas clearly demonstrates this: that we can deliberately, through practice, incline the mind and heart toward more joy, more kindness, more compassion. The mind is trainable, and these kinds of teachings show us the direction we can train our minds and hearts toward.

But when we think of practice as a journey—Greg spoke last night about practice as a path—it can be very easy to think of it as an outward journey, as though I'm here and I've got to get somewhere else, somewhere that's not here, not available here. It's really important to recognize that what we're talking about is an inner journey that's not time-bound. It's certainly not bound by space or any sense of location, but something available and immediate.

As meditation is becoming more commonplace in the West, more understood, more part of—I often say part of the mainstream, though people tell me we're nowhere near mainstream yet. It might seem so to me, but meditation is still way out in left field. Anyway, it's more known than it used to be. You can tell by the number of cartoons that get created about meditating. For a while it was yoga; now it's meditation.

One I saw depicts this idea of meditation as a journey where we go somewhere. A couple is sitting in front of a television, and the bubble coming from the screen is an advertisement for an upcoming show. It says, "This week on The Amazing Race to Enlightenment"—you know that reality show The Amazing Race where they compete? I never watched it, but it's one of those competitive reality shows. "On The Amazing Race to Enlightenment: Can Jim and Susie achieve right mindfulness? And will Bob and Candy eliminate their relentless clinging to self?" They're getting at what we're talking about, but obviously not quite.

This is not an outer journey. You don't get a reward of that kind at the end, or your fifteen minutes of fame. It really is an inner awakening, an inner journey that can be somewhat invisible from the outside. What I love about these teachings is that they show us this possibility. Starting right here, this teaching begins with suffering, the human condition. We don't have to go far to find suffering—that's not

something we need to chase after. And we can see that there is a progressive, processional nature to it. But again, it's not step-by-step, lockstep, linear, with discrete experiences. Rather, there's a flow of experiences that influence each other with feedback loops.

These teachings emphasize how we need a firm foundation to undertake this journey. It's not about just attaining bliss or enlightenment; there are things we can do in the foundational stages—cultivating faith, contentment, a sense of ease in mind and body—that are truly necessary for this whole process to unfold.

I don't want it to seem like you're at one step and then it's like going through school: first grade, second grade, third grade. It's much more fluid than that. Sometimes we go through certain parts of the cycle over and over again, and that's actually helpful and beneficial as we create the foundation for later stages. You can see that this might develop over a long practice period, because the teaching is really talking about full awakening. A long practice period might be something we're working with over a lifetime, over the lifetime of our practice.

Again, in the Buddhist cosmological view, this might be something we're working on over many lifetimes. So it's not a question of getting to the end, some race to enlightenment, but actually just trusting and understanding your practice and where you are right now.

In reading this teaching, you can see how the Buddha gives it. In some ways you can understand how he developed it from his own experience—he was a young prince who lived a life of luxury but gave that up and set off on his quest for enlightenment. But I actually think it probably came more from watching other people as he guided them on this path of practice. I have no basis for this, just my conjecture, but he would see this kind of process unfold over and over again. He gave this teaching at Sāvatthī, the Jeta Grove, and he didn't start teaching there for some time—I don't know how many years until he was given that piece of property and built a monastery there. So it was sometime into his dispensation that he offered this teaching. I just love the sense of the Buddha watching people go through this process and really seeing how it had this developmental nature to it, and that naming it in this way was actually helpful for their unfolding.

As I said, this teaching takes off from dependent origination, but it's not a circle. It's not a list like that. I often think of it as being like fireworks—it takes off and goes in one direction only. And at the end, going in that direction of non-returning to states of suffering.

What I appreciate about this teaching and its relationship to dependent origination is that we can often hear that the only place you can break that chain of suffering is between contact and vedanā, or between vedanā and craving. That's where we have to pay attention, and if we miss that moment, there we are, stuck again on that cycle. I think I said it in my earlier teaching—I don't believe that's actually so. I think wherever we wake up, we can bring mindfulness, clear seeing to the experience and end a particular cycle of dependent arising. But here it very clearly says that we can be in suffering and find a way out. Suffering actually is a doorway to awakening. This, I think, is very helpful for us to see—that we don't

have to be a different person to be on this path and to bring understanding to it. It begins right there with suffering. And it shows us the connections.

Why I think this is helpful, as I said earlier, is that it demonstrates how we need to have this foundation of basic well-being, basic trust in our capacity, in our minds and our bodies to do this kind of work. That's important. We can't bypass that, or through our quest, our saṃvega for awakening—some kind of "nibbāna or bust" intensity—it's not that helpful. We really need to do this foundational work to have this process unfold in a deep and powerful way. We need to pay attention and honor the mind and body where it is right now. Spiritual bypass really doesn't work. It's not like heart surgery, this spiritual surgery that we need to do. There's no around—there's only through, through these different kinds of experiences. And this sense of contentment and well-being being essential on the path is really very instructive.

The Buddha himself, remembering his story of leaving his life of luxury, tried these ascetic practices first. He actually dove into the suffering nature and thought that was a way, that just the suffering was a way out. But that wasn't so. And so he took some milk rice, started to take care of the body, strengthen the body so he could have the capacity to go to awakening. This is a real clear indicator to us about what he called the middle way—that it includes well-being, experiences like joy and happiness and contentment, that we really need to recognize and cultivate those as part of our unfolding practice.

In these lists, what we always see is that each stage is a refinement of the earlier stage, is conditioned by the earlier stage, and that there's a thread in the earlier stage which, if we can recognize it, is what's onward leading. That's part of the mindfulness we need to bring to this—understanding these states to see how they merge into each other. Again, they're not static, separate components, but this mysterious unfolding, this connected unfolding.

So the sequence of transcendent dependent arising, like the jhāna factors I spoke about a few weeks ago, or the factors of enlightenment—many of these lists have an arc to them. I found it helpful to recognize that for myself, that most of these lists that are onward leading have a sense of foundational qualities we can actually, with some intention, cultivate. Then they tend to have energizing qualities that give us energy, the energy for practice, that motivation for practice.

They usually go through a calming section and then deepen into the wisdom section. And this list goes through the same kind of sequence.

So as I said, it starts with suffering, with dukkha. That's one of the foundational qualities. But where the pivotal shift comes is to faith, and I'll talk more about this. I'll just go through the list here. Suffering leads to faith—these are the foundational qualities. The energetic qualities we've talked a little bit about: joy, rapture. Rapture is one of the factors of enlightenment, one of the factors I spoke about. The calming factors are tranquility, happiness, and concentration. And then this leads to the wisdom factors: knowledge and vision of things as they are, then to disenchantment, dispassion, emancipation or liberation, and finally knowledge of destruction of the taints.

So that's the whole list. I'll go through them one by one.

It begins with suffering, taking off really, as I said, almost like fireworks. You might think of dependent origination like a Catherine wheel, those ones that go round and round, but this takes off, it explodes, and it only goes in one direction.

So from this first noble truth, the truth of suffering—we have a mind and a body, there will be suffering. But what's interesting is: why is it noble suffering? What's noble about suffering? Suffering sucks, doesn't it? Why would we want to investigate suffering, go towards suffering?

Gil Fronsdal said this so clearly. He said, "It's noble when we find a path in it." And this is what's happening here. It's noble when it turns us to the Dhamma, to seeing things clearly. That's what makes it noble. And it's certainly noble when it leads us to finding a way out of suffering.

As Ajahn Chah said—I think we've said this already—there's a kind of suffering that leads to more suffering, and a kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering. What we're experiencing here, as challenging as it might be at times, hopefully is a suffering that leads to the end of suffering. Really coming to understand the causes and conditions of our suffering, and not being so lost in it, not being helpless in the face of suffering, but actually using it to understand what this life experience is like, what's happening for us.

We've talked a lot about suffering. It was what got the Buddha on his quest for awakening. He lived a very cosseted life, a kind of prince, very wealthy background, all the sense pleasures. But when he encountered old age, sickness, and death, he was horrified. That's literally the word he would use—horrified. He looked out at the world and said, "How can people go on living as they're doing, knowing this is going to happen to them in some form or other—old age, sickness, and death?" It impelled him on his journey of awakening.

We spend so much of our energy trying to avoid suffering, trying to deny the reality of suffering. Old age, sickness, and death—we hide it away tidily in hospitals and hospices and nursing homes. If you travel in Asia, you see it all around, the difficulties of people's lives and old people out making their way in the world, taking care of things in the way they do. And here, sometimes you can just not see that. You certainly don't see it out on the streets. It's hidden away.

I remember reading about Stephen Levine, who's a teacher in this tradition but often teaches about death and dying. He would give these workshops where people would come to hear those teachings, so he'd be talking about death and dying. And always at some point, he would just drop this question in the middle of whatever he was talking about: "So who right here is going to die?" And he said inevitably, only about half the people would put their hands up. Because it's like, "Well, not me. I'm here. I'm alive. It's not going to happen to me." Yes, we all know in some theoretical way that we're going to die. But me?

You know that this is going to come to an end? It's just so hard to comprehend that the mind simply

doesn't go there.

Reflecting on this, seeing that death is inevitable for all of us—this is how suffering becomes a doorway, because we're inspired to find a way out. And of course it's suffering, our own individual suffering, that has brought probably nearly all of us to this path, wanting to figure this out. How do we do this as a human being? How do we make our way in the world?

Perhaps it was extreme suffering of great loss, injury, or grief. But perhaps it was just feelings of discontent or unsatisfactoriness—a sense that there should be more than this to a human life, not just chasing happiness, material possessions, or getting the right kind of career. All of these questions about what life is all about impel us on the path.

And sometimes it seems the path involves more suffering. On a retreat like this, it can seem that way. Retreats are difficult and challenging—mind, body, day after day, the same schedule, the same things happening, the same mind over and over again. It's difficult. Certainly we don't design retreats to be suffering, but it's what we experience. Part of it is that we actually get more sensitive. We really feel the impact of the world, the impact of our mind states. We see the nature of our mind and how crazy it is at times, how it just leads us down these dead-end tracks and we get lost in confusion and hatred and judging. We see our own suffering, and of course we open to the universal suffering in the world.

But we, unlike the Buddha, have a path of practice, have guides on this path. And so we can find how to use suffering as a doorway to deepening and to opening. There are amazing examples of people in this world who have done this. At the moment, Aung San Suu Kyi—she is just amazing. Everything she's experienced in her life: her father killed, all of the tragedies in Burma, under house arrest for all those years, not able to see her family. Her husband died while she was under house arrest; she wouldn't leave Burma and wasn't able to be with him. She didn't see her sons for ten years or more. And yet during that time she continued her practice and did a lot of metta. She came out of that imprisonment as this radiant being of light and goodness. It's just amazing—finally able to receive her Nobel Peace Prize after all those years, having somehow transformed all of that suffering through her practice into this radiant light that she expresses.

So whereas in the cycle of dependent origination we go from suffering through the cycle again and again, getting stuck in ignorance and repeating the same actions, here the shift is that suffering leads to faith. The faith is that there is a way out, that we don't have to be stuck in that cycle, that there is a different way of relating to our experience so that we don't have to keep going in those repetitive patterns.

This is a huge turning point—to really open to the suffering, not deny it, but actually use it as a foundation or fuel for our practice, out of that conviction, just like the Buddha had, that it's possible to awaken, possible to lessen our suffering and the suffering we cause others.

The way the sutta is sequenced, the Buddha says suffering is the supportive condition for faith to arise.

Faith doesn't come about just by accident or because we're happy as can be; it's actually suffering that allows us to find this avenue of faith.

The Pali word is *saddhā*, and it literally means "to place one's heart upon." I love that definition of faith—just really landing in something and trusting it. In this case, it's trusting the Dhamma, but also trusting our capacity to practice and to be on this path, seeing how important it is in this unfolding.

I know for me faith wasn't something I had an easy relationship to. I'm not a bhakti type, a person into a lot of devotion. But I do clearly remember my first retreat in India, around 1981, with S. N. Goenka. It was a ten-day retreat, so intense. We were in a kind of tent encampment, very simple accommodations and food. Hour-long sits—I had a towel that I was sitting on. That was my zafu, on a concrete floor. It was very uncomfortable.

But there was a truth he spoke that just lit my mind up. What I can remember thinking was: You mean there's a way out? You mean I don't have to keep causing myself and other people suffering? That was a revelation. Nothing I had experienced so far in my limited twenty-five years of life had led me to think that was possible. It just lit something up in me that really affected the rest of the unfolding of my life, because every time after that when I had to make a major decision about where to go, what to do—I was twenty-five, living in India with a backpack, I could go anywhere—the question was always: How can I get closer to the Dhamma?

How can I be with Dhamma people? How can I serve the Dhamma? And my whole life really unfolded out of those kinds of decisions.

But I also remember at the end of that retreat—there were about a hundred people there, and we were all excitedly talking afterwards. It was my first retreat; I was just blown away. I was speaking to another woman who was much more experienced than I, someone who had been practicing for many years. She said something like, "Oh yes, this practice is so helpful for me. I try to do at least one or two retreats every year."

I remember my young hubris saying inwardly—I didn't say it to her—"One or two retreats a year? How pathetic is that? If you're really serious, it's every month, or nonstop, or you go ordain." I had this fire for practice. And then, of course, reality hit. I had to make a living, and all the other things of life happened. But there really was that initial connection.

I'm sure all of you have similar kinds of stories—hearing the teachings and something inside saying, "Oh yes. Someone is speaking the truth here. I'm hearing something that resonates for me," at whatever level.

There are different types of faith. We can have blind faith, where it's really just trusting the experience or the words of another. It sounds good; we want that for ourselves, but we don't know it yet. And then we can have bright faith, which has a sense of illumination—I think that's what I had. I had a kind of bright faith that was very illuminated, but it wasn't yet grounded.

As we practice, as we go on, we can develop what's called verified faith, where we really know for ourselves that transformation is possible because we've tasted it for ourselves. This can then lead to unshakable faith, where it simply isn't a question anymore—this is the path we're on, and it is possible to find freedom.

Sharon Salzberg has this wonderful book on faith. It's small, but so worth reading because, as I said, even though I have and always have had that kind of faith in the practice, it didn't express itself easily for me outwardly. She writes, "I want to encourage delight in the word faith, to reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating." This is a faith that emphasizes a foundation of love and respect for ourselves—something that can enliven our practice and support us.

This kind of faith is necessary. And you all have it. No one signs up for a six-week or three-month retreat without a great deal of faith. It may have been challenged quite a number of times already on this retreat, but something has touched you that led you to make this kind of commitment out of faith, out of trust in the practice.

The Buddha said, "Faith is the beginning of all good things." He began his search out of a faith that it was possible, even as he tried all of those dead ends. They were all part of his unfolding, and he never lost that conviction that it was possible.

It's interesting that the next factor is joy—faith is a supportive factor for joy. Faith can sometimes seem a little earnest, perhaps not joyful, but to actually find the joy in faith, how much happiness we can have when faith is really grounded in us, when we have a sense of trust in our capacity, when we're not swayed by thoughts of "Who are you?" and "You can't do this" and "Who do you think you are?" When instead there is simply this knowing—"It's possible. It's possible for me"—a gladness arises out of that.

This is the next factor: *pāmojja*, joy or delight. This kind of joy isn't the joy of getting our sensual desires met, of material possessions, or the giddiness of certain experiences. It's actually a meditative joy. It's the kind of joy that arises when the mind is not so troubled by the hindrances.

As the Buddha says, "Pāmojja develops with the abandonment of the five hindrances. When the practitioner sees the five hindrances abandoned in herself, gladness arises within her. Thus gladdened, rapture arises. And when she is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil."

This is the next part of the sequence: joy, this sense of gladness or delight, this pleasure in experience when the hindrances are at bay. When the mind is not troubled, not pushed and pulled by wanting and not wanting, by restlessness or desire or doubt or sleepiness, we can start to really appreciate ourselves, our capacity for practice, our lives. It's very intertwined with gratitude, which many of you have expressed—gratitude to be able to practice, to this place for supporting us. It's a beautiful quality of mind.

So really see joy in these kinds of states as essential on the path.

This is one of the things I really want to emphasize in this talk tonight. Analayo, the great Buddhist scholar who wrote the book on Satipatthana that I highly recommend, said that the entire scheme of this path, the gradual training, can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy. This is not how we usually understand the path. We talk a lot about suffering. We experience a lot of suffering. But to really see it as a refining of joy is transformative.

I think I mentioned in my other talk the other day how happiness is in right now. So is joy. Joy and happiness really go together. Many of you probably know James Baraz, whom we call Mr. Joy, because he's really made it the focus of his practice and his teachings for many years now. He's written a wonderful book called *Awakening Joy* and also offers a series of monthly classes that literally thousands of people participate in because he makes them available online. I've gone and taught at his class, and it's really a very happy place to be—people practicing joy.

Here is a quote from someone who took the class with James: "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 the joy inherent in many situations rather than the negative or painful aspects."

Again, this is highlighting the choice that we have, more than we think, to experience, to open to, to incline towards this quality of joy and happiness. It's possible that it's here even if it's really subtle, even if it's something very simple—a cup of tea at the right time, a sunset, a warm breeze. To really notice and incline the mind towards encouraging that, and to feel it as beneficial, as wholesome—this is so helpful, so important.

It is said that joy is a supportive condition for rapture. This is the next factor—rapture, or piti. Again, Greg spoke about it in the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. I spoke about it as a jhanic factor. It's a mental factor, a factor of mind, where the mind is so absorbed in its chosen object that it delights in it, that it doesn't want to go anywhere else. It can manifest, as we've said, through strong physical sensations—uplifting, pushing, vibrating, lightening of the visual field, or a sense of lightening in the body, electrical kinds of impulses. It always sounds very appealing, and sometimes it is. But sometimes it can actually be challenging as this energy gets strong or coarse or really insistent.

What's happening, the functioning of rapture, is to increase the absorption. It feeds on itself as we delight in the meditation process and object. It actually creates this very supportive feedback loop. The mind doesn't want to be anywhere else. It's happy to be in the present moment. It's happy to be with this experience.

What's interesting is the next part of the sequence—that rapture is the supportive condition for tranquility, pasaddhi. Again, the same as the seven factors, the same sequencing. It's always interesting to me that such an energetic experience as rapture leads to tranquility. But what happens in this sequencing is that as the mind gets collected, as it gets absorbed—I think I pointed to this in my talk on the jhanic

factors—there's always an inclination towards simplicity, towards some kind of refinement. So as the energy of rapture subsides, the mind is collected and connected to its meditation object. As the energy dissipates a little and gets more in balance, naturally tranquility or calm can arise. There's also, as the piti gets strong, a lack of thought. The hindrances are again temporarily kept at bay, so the mind can just kind of settle easily into this calmness. There's this sense of calm.

With tranquility, the mind quieting, this kind of refinement that I've talked about—then tranquility is the supportive condition for sukha, for happiness, one of the jhanic factors that I spoke about. This kind of happiness is a meditative experience. Like joy, it's not an external, really excited experience of happiness, but a quiet contentment, a happy contentment of mind and body that has a sweetness to it.

Often when people report states of tranquility, they can come in saying, "It's boring. Nothing much happening. Where's the drama? Where's the juice in practice?" And we always point towards, well, what's actually there? This is actually calm. The aversive aspect of it is "this is boring." Boredom is just a lack of interest. We get interested in the tranquility, stay connected to it. See if you can find the pleasantness of it. See if you can find the pleasantness in that stillness. That's what leads to this very sublime kind of happiness—sukha.

Then there's another transition that happens that again is really important—not that we have to try to have it, but to understand as we deepen in our practice. Sukha is the supportive condition for concentration.

Most of us think that the supportive condition for concentration is beating ourselves up, trying harder, sitting longer, walking slower, contracting ourselves with gritted teeth and hair on fire or whatever. That is not in this list, that kind of practice. Sukha as the supportive condition for concentration. I found this such a revelation, and it's so hard to remember because we all over-effort when we're trying to get concentrated. It's almost inevitable. And to really trust that what is a supportive condition is a sense of ease and wellbeing and contentment—that's what will allow the mind to deepen into concentration.

Again, you can see how all of these factors are playing in. The rapture, there's absorption, there's tranquility, there's calm, there's this subtle happiness that's sweet and soft. That's what allows the mind to deepen. Not pushing, not striving, not judging, not getting the whip out, but actually allowing this sense of ease and relaxation. This is what leads to concentration, to samādhi.

The kind of concentration we're talking about here develops by successive moments of mindfulness. It's why we've been emphasizing continuity. And of course, it can deepen into jhāna, and that's another whole discourse that could be given about jhāna and the deepening of jhāna. But really, it's just enough concentration. We often talk about access concentration, neighborhood concentration, because it's near enough to jhāna for the mind to really be focused, really be one-pointed, that ekaggatā quality being there. And that's enough concentration for the mind to turn to wisdom.

We don't get concentrated for concentration's sake. It's not an end in itself. As pleasant as it can be and as gratifying—it's like, "I've got it, I got concentrated, I'm concentrated, that's all I'm looking for"—we get concentrated in order to be able to turn the concentrated mind to clear seeing.

One of the qualities that the Buddha talked about that this concentrated mind has is that it's malleable, flexible, and steady. I love these terms. It's malleable—it's trainable, actually responsive. It's flexible—it can shift and move in response to experience and to our intentions and to our inclinations of the mind. And it's steady—it actually can pay attention moment to moment to what's happening.

So we take this concentrated mind and turn it to changing experience. Turn it to seeing things as they are. And as again we've said, what we see when we look with this kind of steadiness is the inherent unreliability of experience. We see how impermanent it is, that there is nothing solid there at the core, at the heart. This is what the whole cycle of dependent origination shows—there's nothing, there's no self there, there's nothing solid. There's just these processes happening over and over again. And so we see that with this mind that's steady.

Concentration leads to knowledge and vision of things as they are. Yathā bhūta ñāna dassana. I think Carol spoke about this the other night. She was always saying, "Yathā bhūta—things as they have come to be." This is the mind that sees clearly how things unfold. This is the wisdom that Joseph was talking about this morning. When the Buddha uses these terms, knowledge and vision, it's not intellectual knowledge. It's not just seeing. It's really immediate understanding. It's insight. It's direct.

As we start to see things the way they are, this leads to the next of these factors, which is nibbidā. This term used to be translated as revulsion or disgust. And I was always a little confused by that because, you know, we've talked about joy and happiness and tranquility and these beautiful states and clear seeing, and what do you see? Ugh, revulsion and disgust?

Well, who wants that, you know, as a path of practice?

But the more modern scholars have come to see that that's actually a mistranslation of the term. Andy Olenski, who's a scholar in residence over at BCBS, says that most literally nibbida means "without finding" — not able to find. And the translation he and Bhikkhu Bodhi prefer is disenchantment.

I think that's wonderful. We were enchanted. We were caught in craving, caught in all of the lust for experience, blinded by that illusion. And we become disenchanted by experience — no longer so fascinated.

Olenski offers a story from the texts that usefully illustrates the meaning of this most important term. 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 he thus 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 the 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.

This is a mindset that we perhaps already know. How many things have you been enchanted with in your life that you subsequently became disenchanted with? A love object, some passionate activity, a hobby, some remodel project in your home, some activity that you used to pursue with such fervor. And where is that passion now? It just no longer serves that purpose.

Hopefully by this time in the retreat, you have a little bit of that relationship to your thoughts — just no longer so enchanted by them, believing them, wanting to indulge in them, wanting to cozy up and let them run the show. It's like, "I've just seen that so many times."

A simple example: can you remember, some number of years ago, when happiness was coming home from school and turning on the television and watching Gilligan's Island? Who would want to watch Gilligan's Island now? Maybe in the middle of this retreat you might want to watch Gilligan's Island — anything except my own mind! Just that sense that it doesn't do it anymore. It used to be that was happiness. And this nibbida recognizes: no, it's not there anymore. And so the mind turns away.

This turning away leads to the next factor, which is dispassion — viraga. Raga means lust or passion; viraga, dispassion. Again, not out of aversion or forceful rejection, but because we don't see the satisfaction there, the mind moves naturally to dispassion, to letting go. This is a natural turning away, like the renunciation or relinquishment we've spoken about. It's not out of rejecting, but out of knowing there's not the kind of happiness available that we thought was there. The mind naturally turns away.

It's said that this is a turning point in the path of practice. The previous sequences were in the realm of the relative, and it's at this point the mind turns to the transcendent. It actually lets go of its obsession with the six sense doors and getting happiness or satisfaction through them, and turns to what's called the deathless element, the unconditioned — to what's not changing, to what's not subject to change. A shift happens. There's a real knowing that the mind can open into freedom.

This is the next stage: liberation, vimuti. The freedom that the Buddha spoke about comes out of this mind that has let go of its attachments, is no longer bound, is no longer clinging, is no longer suffering in that same way — the mind that's free of greed, aversion, and delusion. This mind becomes radiant and bright. It's no longer visited by those defilements, those difficulties of mind.

What's interesting is this process doesn't stop there. There's actually another final stage, which is knowledge that this has happened — knowledge of the destruction of the asavas, asava-kaya-jnana. This knowing that liberation has happened, that the mind has been freed. You'll see this cycle often as the Buddha talks about awakening: there's the awakening moment and then the reviewing moment where one knows, "Yes, this has happened."

This is true. The Buddha says 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. This is the origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the path to the cessation of the taints." As she is knowing and seeing this, her 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 in her: "It is liberated." This is the Buddha saying, "Done is what had to be done." That this has happened.

Now again, this is pointing to final release, the awakening of full liberation. But we've all had moments here on this retreat of this kind of opening, this kind of deep and profound letting go, where you've seen some particular construct of suffering, some mind pattern, some reactivity, some tendency towards judging—and you've seen it end. You've seen that in that moment it's not there, it does not exist. Not to say that it mightn't come back in some form, but the very seeing of its ending means that it's not permanent. It's not who you truly are.

And we start to trust that—this temporary nibbana that Ajahn Buddhadasa talked about, where he said if we didn't all experience it every day, we'd go crazy. The mind has these moments of release, of letting go, of clear knowing of the possibility of the path and of awakening. We can know this. And on this path there are many moments of enlightenment. Traditionally there are four, but I actually think there are many. And our recognition of their power—of these moments of calm, of clear seeing—reveals that when mindfulness is really clear, the mind isn't troubled. There is actually a freedom from greed and aversion and delusion in that knowing, in that profound depth of mindfulness.

And so to see the possibilities that are here in each moment, to actually incline towards them, to encourage, to find the threads of these different aspects of experience and know that this is the path, this is the direction we go in.

I know this can seem complicated. Anything with twelve steps is inherently complicated and troubling to the mind. I really want to keep it simple, about the central aspects of the foundation of joy and contentment—the gladdening of the mind that's so important, that sukha, happiness, leads to concentration—and that all we have to do is keep going. As Bhikkhu Bodhi said, there are only two things you need to be successful in your spiritual practice. Only two things: to start and to keep going.

This is what these kinds of teachings point to—that there's an onward-leading nature to them, and that we can know this for ourselves. As Ajahn Chah says, if you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you'll have complete peace.

I want to finish with the words of the Buddha, the ending of this sutta, because it offers such lovely imagery:

"Just as, monks, when rain descends heavily upon some mountaintop, the water flows down along with the slope and fills the clefts, gullies, and creeks. These being filled up, fill up the pools. These being filled

up, fill up the ponds. These being filled up, fill up the streams. These being filled, fill up the rivers. And the rivers being filled up, fill up the great ocean.

"In the same way, monks, ignorance is a supportive condition for sankaras, karmic formations." And he goes on through the whole chain of dependent origination, but then says: "Suffering is the supportive condition for faith. Faith is the supportive condition for joy. Joy is the supportive condition for rapture. Rapture is the supportive condition for tranquility. Tranquility is the supportive condition for happiness. Happiness is the supportive condition for concentration. Concentration is the supportive condition for knowledge and vision of things as they really are. Knowledge and vision of things as they really are is the supportive condition for disenchantment. Disenchantment is the supportive condition for dispassion. Dispassion for emancipation. And emancipation is the supportive condition for knowledge of the destruction of the taints."

So just as water always finds its way to the ocean, this path goes in one direction only—to greater freedom, greater happiness, and greater joy.

Let us allow these words to settle into silence.

Thank you for your attention.

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