The One-Way Street & Nibbāna - Introducing Satipaṭṭhāna

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:04:45

Tonight I'd like to introduce the practice that we engage with in Satipaṭṭhāna, the way I normally approach it, which is to begin by examining the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

Any kind of Buddhist meditative tradition is based on the teachings of the Buddha, and these teachings are found in the suttas. There are different discourses that address meditation, but there are two major meditation discourses: the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Ānāpānasati Sutta. Ānāpānasati is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. This tradition we practice is based on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—it's the root text. All of the modern Satipaṭṭhāna meditation methods go back to this discourse and its associated teachings.

Satipaṭṭhāna is variously translated. Older translations rendered it as "the foundations of mindfulness." Now you see translations like "the establishing of mindfulness" or "applications of mindfulness." Perhaps later we'll discuss why there are different translations, but for our purposes tonight, the main thing is that at the center of it is sati, which we explored last night.

Sati literally means memory, from the verb sarati, "to remember." It was translated as "mindfulness" by T.W. Rhys Davids, who first used this term in 1881. Different translators experimented with various terms, but by 1911 or thereabouts, "mindfulness" had become the accepted translation. We discussed how it fits quite well—when we talk about "minding" something, we mean to watch the store, look after it, don't wander away from it, keep your eyes on it, make sure you know what's going on. Essentially, it carries the same meaning. We explored last night the phrase "mind the gap," the sign in railway stations—remember that there's a gap when you step in and out of the train. So the translation definitely works.

When this discourse opens, the Buddha declares: "This way, the four applications of mindfulness"—here I'm translating Satipaṭṭhāna as applications of mindfulness—"is a one-way street for purifying beings, transcending sorrow and distress, vanishing pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realizing Nibbāna. What are the four?

"Here a bhikkhu, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, he lives tracking feeling as feeling, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, he lives tracking heart-mind as heart-mind, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, he lives tracking phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful."

This is the uddesa, the introduction to the discourse, and it essentially summarizes the entire teaching.

First, it begins with evaṃ me sutaṃ, translated here as "this is how I heard it," though usually rendered as "thus have I heard." All suttas begin this way, reminding us that this is an oral tradition. Oral traditions work differently than literary traditions. We are accustomed to being shaped by literary tradition, and we're moving into yet another kind of tradition with the internet—more of a screen-based tradition whose implications we don't yet fully understand.

In an oral tradition, everything is based on memory. Information comes through the ear and ultimately flows from the mouth. Everything is spoken, recited, sung—and particularly sung. These suttas, when we approach them as texts and read them (or at least don't read them because they can seem extremely tedious), are actually songs, meant to be performed in chorus. We miss much when we simply read them.

There's a certain rhythm in the discourses, particularly found in the patterns of repetition. Here we have one sentence repeated four times about the bhikkhu. Bhikkhu here means a committed practitioner. The legal definition of bhikkhu is "fully ordained male," or monk. But the essential meaning of bhikkhu is any committed practitioner—ordained or not ordained, male or female. I like to emphasize this point, and I want to stress that this is not a New Age reinterpretation. This is the ancient tradition. In fact, there's even a reference for this—Dhammapada, verse 142. Look it up.

So this discourse is addressed to all committed practitioners. It's addressed to us.

So here a practitioner surrendering longing and sorrow for the world lives tracking body as body, feeling as feeling, heart-mind as heart-mind, phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful.

This passage is repeated four times throughout the discourse, and the thing about repetition is that repetition shows us what's important. For a start, if you're chanting this, what you repeat the most goes deepest into the memory banks and simply becomes part of you. And secondly, if it's repeated extensively, you know this is important—this is what you must pay attention to. So we're going to examine this particular sentence closely.

The discourse was given when the Buddha was living among the Kurus, near the market town of Kamasadhamma. We have absolutely no idea where the market town of Kamasadhamma is, but we do know where the Kurus lived. The Kuru country is roughly the area south of modern Delhi. So the Buddha lived and worked in the Ganges plain, in an area extending from the southeast—roughly on the border of West Bengal—up the valley to the area south of Delhi, the Kuru country. And it was in the northwest that he gave this and several other important teachings.

The Buddha describes this way of practice—the four applications of mindfulness—as a one-way street: *ekā yana magga*. He then outlines a series of progressive attainments: purifying beings, transcending sorrow and distress, vanishing pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realizing Nibbāna. This is a one-way

street to Nibbāna, and this is how the Buddha introduces it. It's quite a powerful teaching.

Mindfulness is, as we've discussed, very popular these days through the secular mindfulness movement. The purpose of mindfulness practice in the secular context is basically to reduce suffering. You could say it's designed to take people from clinical levels of sorrow, distress, and depression, and bring them into normal levels of sorrow and distress. But the Buddha doesn't say this. He says this practice is actually for Nibbāna.

I like to talk about Nibbāna, though I was told long ago—and have been told a few times since—that this is not a good idea. Initially, I agreed it wasn't a good idea because it's such an impossible subject to grasp and therefore impossible to talk about. But the reason why it's not a good idea, I was told, is because no one's interested. People just want to be a bit happier. That's why they come to meditation centers and do meditation courses. No one out there is interested in Nibbāna; best not to mention it.

I wouldn't argue with that observation. However, I would argue with the idea that this is something new. Throughout Buddhist history, most people have not been interested in Nibbāna. Most traditional Buddhists in traditional Buddhist societies had no interest in Nibbāna. It's there, kind of floating around somewhere, but that's not really what they're interested in. What they're interested in is having a good life this time around, and then getting a good rebirth—a nice rebirth in heaven, or if you're a woman, getting reborn as a man, which is obviously much easier.

This is, you could say, secular mindfulness. It's basically the functional equivalent of practicing mindfulness because at the moment—and for some time—you've been feeling pretty miserable, but you want to feel much better. When you feel much better, you can get a nice job, make some money, drive a nice car, build a reasonable superannuation account, and have a comfortable life.

If you have that kind of motivation, then basically what you're saying is: I have an idea from current experience of what happiness looks like, I want that, so I'm projecting my view of what would make my life nice now into the future, and that's what I want. That's essentially what the ambition is. In a traditional Buddhist society, if you say you want a nice rebirth, it's essentially the same move. It's projecting what you think happiness is now into the future—it's just that their sense of time is a bit different. But it's basically the same move.

If you look at advertisements for superannuation, it's basically heaven for old age. You see these ads where people are old but incredibly happy. There was one favorite I used to see at a railway station: an old couple on a tropical beach, both with fixed grins on their faces, one holding up a cocktail. Clearly this is meant to convey paradise—a kind of heaven realm which you can be reborn into if only you accumulate enough superannuation.

Most people have always been interested in this kind of heavenly rebirth. If they undertake some kind of practice, for most people that's what they're in it for. Only a few people are seriously in it for Nibbāna.

And it's a really weird ambition to have because for a start we've got absolutely no idea what it could be. Like none. If we have an idea of what it is, we're wrong. Because all we're doing is taking some attachment that we have and projecting it into the future. So it actually is very good advice not to talk about Nibbāna.

But the border is quite clear. This is what it's for. So we'll talk about this.

But first of all, the relationship between the practice and Nibbāna—he says this is a one-way street that leads to Nibbāna. Now this is a very strong statement. If I'm heading down a one-way street, and at the end of that street there's a destination X, then if I keep going, I will get there. There's no room for doubt. I will get there. I might dawdle, I might take my time, I might be distracted by the pub just down on the left, or the department store further along, but if I keep going, I will get there.

And this is the relationship that the Buddha says that Nibbāna has to this practice. If we do this practice, we will, like it or not, want it or not, eventually get to Nibbāna if we keep doing it. So this is the relationship that I'm interested in looking at tonight.

So first of all, what is Nibbāna? The word itself comes from nirvāti, to blow out, to extinguish. We'll get to that. Nibbāna represents the ultimate goal of the practice, the goal beyond which there is nothing more to be gained and also nothing more to be said. It's like one academic of Buddhism compares it to the full stop at the end of a story.

He points out that if you read European fairy stories, you have this incredible drama with the prince and the princess and the wicked witch and the evil stepmother, and they're all getting entangled and all these things are happening. Kitties are being baked in ovens and wolves are attacking ladies dressed in red and so on. But eventually the story comes to an end where hero and heroine get together and the final sentence is "and they lived happily ever after." And at the end of that sentence there's a full stop.

Nibbāna is the full stop. In other words, it's the end. That's it. The story is over. And it's complete. And now at that point, the full stop itself has no meaning. But that point of stopping is what gives meaning to everything that comes before it. Now we can look back and say, oh, that's what it was all about. It was all heading to this. And it's meaningless to talk about anything that happens next.

So let's say if you're reading a fairy story and you go through all the dramas and the prince and the princess finally get together and they lived happily ever after. Full stop. And you feel very satisfied. But you notice there's another page. So you turn the page. And then there's another chapter, and it's called "Ten Years After."

And it turns out that the prince is now the king, and he's incredibly bored with his wife. And she's got half a dozen children, and she's being driven crazy by them, especially since some of them are complete spoiled brats—I mean, they are princes and princesses after all. The king has been chasing other women. Plus he's been getting into the liquor and he's turned into something of a tyrant, and his aristocracy are muttering among themselves and they're sharpening the knives. And the queen is just not only completely

fed up with him but really worried about what's going to happen if they really do assassinate the old bastard. And whenever they do meet on state occasions, which is rarely because the king tries to avoid it as much as possible, they invariably have embarrassing fights in front of everybody. And the whole thing is a complete mess.

And you're reading this and you cannot help but feel a certain degree of disappointment. It's like it should have ended back then. Well, try to work out, okay, Nibbāna, so then what? It's making the same kind of move—it just doesn't work.

When Europeans started to study Buddhism, they thought Nibbāna meant extinction. In other words, death. And they thought of it this way. They thought, look, Indians, including Buddhists, especially Buddhists, believe in life after life after life after life.

When you have Nibbana, you don't have any more lives. What does that mean? Well, it means you actually die. So life is suffering and the only way out is death. And that view was propagated by a lot of early scholars and there's still ripples of that early view that you come across.

But Nibbāna is not extinction. It's the going out of a flame. It has two levels of meaning. One is cognitive and the other is affective. So you could say head and heart.

In terms of cognitive, Nibbana is not extinction. It's reality no longer defined by concept or narrative. Life lived beyond the limits of concepts. Now we touched upon this already. So we talked about the relationship to the body. And we talked about how our relationship to the body is governed by our concepts about the body. So we don't actually experience the body. What we experience is our concept of the body. This is my body, and it has certain characteristics. This is what it can do. This is what it can't do.

And in bodywork, it's really interesting to see how deep these conceptual layers go. So, for example, if someone who has trouble sitting cross-legged, and in fact doesn't sit cross-legged because it's too painful, was asked, why don't you just sit cross-legged on the floor? And they might say, well I can't, meaning my body cannot. And they're saying a simple physical fact. My body does not have the flexibility required to sit cross-legged on the floor. Physical fact, that's it.

Apparently, it doesn't matter how tight a body is, if someone's laid out on the operating theatre, and let's say they're so tight that they can't even lay on the theatre, they have to be supported when they first lay down, if they're given the anaesthetic, the muscles relax and they're completely flat on the table. Not only that, but doctors or nurses could move any limb to its full degree. They could put an old person who's completely stiff into a full lotus position without any trouble whatsoever. The body has no problem doing that at all. Zero.

When the person comes out of the anaesthetic, all the old patterns of tightness return as they come back into consciousness. The reason why I cannot sit comfortably on the floor in full lotus isn't because of this. It's because of this. It's the mind, not the body. And this is weird. This is seriously weird.

But when you notice the way that we're doing the body work, basically what we're doing is we're persuading the mind that it's okay, you can do this. We're basically talking ourselves into it. Move into the stretch. Find the point of resistance. Stop. Breathe. Relax. Why relax? It's the mind which is tensing up. Because the body hasn't been put into this position for a long time, and so the mind has decided it can't. So what our job is to persuade it that actually you're wrong. We can. But it takes time to persuade. But it's basically just persuading the mind. Get yourself a new concept. That's all.

Another way of looking at this is you could ask what's the physiological difference between a muscle which is really tight and the same muscle which is completely flexible and loose. The physiological difference is precisely zero. There's none, whatsoever.

The difference is entirely in the mind. This is a fascinating illustration of how deeply concept permeates human existence. Our very physical world is a product of concept. The body we inhabit is a product of concept.

Then of course we have other manifestations: our relationship to thinking, who we think we are, what we think this situation is. Why is thinking so addictive? Why can't we simply drop it? Why do we persist in generating stories even when they're incredibly painful? Even when we know exactly how they're going to end because we've told ourselves this story twenty thousand times before. Why? Why is it so difficult?

The relationship to thought is very interesting, and we're going to explore this more deeply during the retreat. It's really intriguing because again it illustrates how profound the clinging to concept goes—the absolute determination to believe that this is who I am, this is who you are, and this is what the situation is. Absolute determination. And under no circumstances will we allow this to be challenged.

So what would it be like to live in a reality which is not defined by our concepts? Or to look at it another way, what would it be like to live in a world where we don't cling to our concepts of things? What would that be like when we don't mistake our concept of reality for reality, when we recognize that reality is actually something different?

This is quite interesting. When we live in a world of concept, notice that concepts tend to be permanent, or at least long-lasting. I have a concept about something or someone and it remains stable. Concepts tend to be fixed and they also have very clear borders. For example, I know what's good and I know what's bad. That's it.

When we practice, when we experience through concepts, the experience itself tends to be quite hard and quite rigid and quite clear-cut and usually very familiar. When we drop the concept, we find that experience is a lot more fluid and in a sense mysterious—mysterious not in the sense that I don't know what it is, or rather not in the sense that it's not clear. It's quite clear, but in fact I don't know what it is. That is, I can't pin it down conceptually because it's already moving, it's already becoming something else. And as soon as I reach out and try to pin it down, it slips away.

We talked about this in relation to the experience of pain in meditation practice. Some people really like to use pain as a meditation object because when we do it correctly, pain itself disappears. And what we have is this flowing stream of physical sensation and a closely associated flowing stream of mental responses. But we don't have pain anymore.

It's interesting if you go through an experience like that where the pain dissolves, where you cannot—there's something, it's there, something is there—but I can't actually identify it as being pain. And certainly not my pain. And yet before, it obviously was my pain. And when it was my pain, the world was quite clear-cut to me. I knew what I could do and what I couldn't do. But now, I don't know, because there's just this cascading flow of experience and I quite literally don't know what's going to happen next. So I'm not in a position to put a judgment on it.

When we have these kinds of experiences, we're getting a sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he speaks of nibbāna—because he's talking about a life lived which is not dominated by our concepts of things. The concepts no longer get in the way. The relationship to what's going on is not interfered with by the concepts, and we get a taste of that when we practice.

The Buddha also talks about nibbāna in the affective sense, the heart sense. In fact, mostly when he's talking about nibbāna, he'll speak of it in this affective sense. Some of the technical terms that the Buddha uses are essentially cognitive. For example, he talks about delusion. Delusion is a problem, and the counterpart or the opposite of delusion is wisdom. So we should develop wisdom and get away from our delusion or our ignorance. Both of these are cognitive—they're up here.

Whereas the Buddha will also talk about the problem in terms of what he calls taṇhā—literally thirst, or usually translated as craving. This is in the heart. It's not cognitive; it's something in the heart. Nibbāna is a term that belongs to the heart, normally.

It's an affective term. And this is where you get the image of the going out of a fire. The Buddha uses the image of fire, and of course this is the ancient Indian context where he lives in a country which in summer is extremely hot. Fire conveys an image of heat at uncomfortable levels, and restlessness. Fires are always moving. So pain and restlessness—these are the images presented by fire. But also fascination. You know how pleasant it is to look at a fire because it's constantly moving and dancing. So it's fascinating, but it's painful and it's restless.

Now, if we ask: What defines a fire? How do we identify a fire? Because fire is fire is fire is fire—it's always the same. But we can identify different kinds of fire, and we identify them on the basis of their fuel, what feeds them. So we say this is a bushfire, that's a gas fire, that's a house fire, and so on. What limits a fire? Well, it's fuel. It can't go beyond its fuel. If a fire can't move to the next bit of fuel, then that's it. It's all over. What does a fire cling to? Its fuel. What feeds it.

So this is the image that the Buddha uses, and the terminology—because he's speaking in Pali, people

listening to him get a pun that we miss. The word for fuel in Pali is upādāna, and the word for clinging or attachment is upādāna. It's the same word.

Now, in English, if you study Buddha Dharma, you know that clinging and attachment are very bad things indeed. And you should stop doing it, otherwise you'll go blind. Or worse. And this teaching can cause a certain amount of confusion. Because if you think about it, what is a human life without attachment? Psychopathology. I mean, someone who's not attached has got serious problems, let's face it. So it seems a bit weird that the Buddha doesn't like attachment. But of course the Buddha's not talking about what we mean normally when we talk about attachment. He's talking about something else. He's talking about what fuels, what feeds something.

If you think about the match—I strike a match and hold it up. What's feeding the fire? It's the match. It's the matchstick. Looked at from the other perspective, what is the fire clinging to? It's the matchstick. And the matchstick is what defines the nature of the fire.

Upādāna is a form of holding which defines the nature of the person. In other words, upādāna—let's say clinging—is not simple wanting. Upādāna is a form of wanting which is so strong that it actually defines who we are.

Now, wanting always contains its shadow, which is not wanting. So if there's something that I want, there's something that I don't want. If I want the sunny side of the street, I don't want the shady side. If I want the shady side, I don't want the sunny side. So desire and aversion—each is the shadow of the other, and upādāna, clinging, includes both.

But the thing about it is, it's a form of holding on or repelling away from which is bound up with my sense of who I am, my sense of identity. Who I am, who you are, what this world is. It's not simple wanting. It's a relationship to something which is necessary for our sense of who we are. If I don't have this, I die. Not necessarily physically, but I die in the sense of I don't know who I am anymore.

If you're caught up in some kind of addiction, one of the characteristics of it is that the person caught in it genuinely cannot imagine what it would be like to live without whatever it is. Because it's just so intrinsic to the identity that it's actually inconceivable what it would be like to not have it. It would be a different person.

We can see it on a broad scale. I think it's part of the problem behind the whole business about why we cannot, as a culture, as a society, adapt to climate change.

Someone is faced with certain scientific evidence that says disaster is coming. We've got to do something about it. And so the first response is, "Oh, okay, we'll do something about it. What should we do about it?" And then we get the list. And we look at the list and we realize what you're saying is we cannot live the way we've always lived—that business as usual is no longer an option.

Wait a minute. Who would we be? Who would I be? What would this society be like? I can't conceive it. Certainly I would not be here because surely I am the way that I live. My identity is caught up in all of this stuff. Take all of this stuff away—who am I? Who are we? It's just inconceivable. It's impossible to even imagine, and it's certainly horrific to even go in that direction. So let's just not go there and pretend something else is happening.

And the argument might come back: "But if we don't do this, we or our children or our grandchildren are going to die." And the problem is that if we do do this, I'm certainly going to die, because I cannot be the person I am. I have to be someone else, and I don't know who that is. So no, sorry, I can't do that. There's a pulling back.

And we can see it much more intimately in our relationship to our thinking. Why can't I drop this story about myself? Because if I did, I would drop myself. I would cease to exist.

I remember one time when I was practicing in Burma and I was having a horrific time wrestling with out-of-control thinking. Basically I would attack it with a sledgehammer—beat it, bash it with heroic effort and relentless noting until the thinking mind was reeling in dizziness and semi-consciousness. I would beat it down to the point where it got really quiet and looked as if it might possibly disappear. And as soon as the mind registered that it might possibly stop, there was a moment of panic and it was back again.

I was just astonished at my own perversity. But looking back I realized I was faced with the threat of death, because I was so caught up in my thinking that if it stopped, what would happen to me? Well, I'd be dead—because it was the thinking that was creating me.

So that relationship to thinking is upadana. It's feeding me. If I take this away, I'm taking away me. And that's horrifying.

Does any of this make sense? So this is the fire. This whole process is the fire. Nibbāna is the going out of the fire. This whole process just fades away.

We could say it's the extinguishing of the fire, but if we say "to extinguish a fire," it can convey something much too forceful. It's like the house is on fire. How do I extinguish it? Call the fire department. They have these massive hoses and they blast it with water and the fire's out. If we've got a kind of macho approach to the practice, then we can be having that approach—and this is certainly what I did when I was a foolish young man. Now that I'm old and wise, I don't bother. I just warm my hands by the glow of the fire.

But the image is the natural going out of the fire. If there's a fire burning, and as the Buddha points out, it all depends on its upadana, its fuel. So I'm faced with a fire, and if I look at what I'm doing—which we do in this meditation practice—I recognize that what I'm doing is hurling log after log after log after log onto this fire.

After a time I think, "I'm holding this log and I'm thinking, what should I do? What if I just drop it and

don't throw this particular log on the fire?" That seems a good idea. Now the fire is still burning, but if I stop throwing logs on it, it starts to go out. And it's just a natural process. I don't need any divine intervention. It just naturally happens.

So the secret is: stop throwing logs on the fire. That's all. It's really quite simple. Very difficult, but fundamentally very simple. If we do that, the fire will go out in its own way, in its own time. But it's just a natural process.

Now there's a direct relationship between this going out of the fire and the practice of satipaṭṭhāna.

And basically it's all about our relationship to experience, how we relate to experience. When we start to practice, the way that we relate to experience becomes evident to us. One way of looking at it is that we discover that our normal relationship to experience is infected by a sense of something to gain or something to lose from the particular event.

So, right now, there is something I can gain or something that I can lose from this now. I'm sitting up here on the throne, giving a Dharma talk. I have something to gain. If I give a good talk, they'll think I'm a good teacher. They'll give me lots of dana. That'll be really great. And I have something to lose. If I give a poor talk, my reputation is dented. People will get fed up with it. They'll notice that I keep repeating the same talks all the time anyway, and they won't bother to come to retreats. I won't get any dana, and I'll be in trouble at home because our expenses are going up. So right now, in this situation, I have something to gain and therefore I have something to lose. My whole relationship to this is affected, infected by this relationship.

You have something to gain or something to lose. Why do people like Dharma talks in meditation retreats? Now I find this a totally perverse form of enjoyment. I really don't like attending Dharma talks in meditation retreats. I find them usually quite tedious. But I notice that a lot of people actually enjoy them. It seems to be the substitute for TV.

So you come in here, and what is it you want when you come in here? Do you want a nice, entertaining, interesting and stimulating Dharma talk? Is that what you want? Do you have something to gain? Do you have something to lose? "Oh my God, this is tedious." And if there's something to gain or something to lose, isn't it true that you're constantly judging the experience? "Can I give this one the thumbs up, or do I have to cross it out?"

And of course, when we're practicing, I'm following my meditation object. The same infection. I've got something to gain or something to lose from this meditation period. Am I getting my nice concentration? Or not? And it comes down—let's assume we're using breathing as meditation object, and I'm just using breathing as the example of the generic meditation object—this in-breath, is it fulfilling what I want it to fulfill? Is it doing what I want it to do? Is it behaving the way I want it to behave? Or not? This out-breath. What's that doing? I have something to gain or something to lose.

And this thought, this feeling, this movement, this desire, this aversion—the more I look at my relationship to experience, the more I see how this relationship is infected by this sense of gain and loss. In other words, grasping and rejection, clinging at a deep level. Upadana. Because all at the bottom of all this is who I think I am and who I want to be in the future. I don't want to be in the future who I am now. I mean it's okay now, but I really want to be someone better. I want an improvement.

So as we do the practice, we can see how deep this relationship goes. And if we look at our relationship to distraction, what is it that distracts me? Or rather, what's fueling the distraction? What's underneath it? It's this fuel. It's the upadana. It's the clinging. And it's there all the time.

So what we're doing in this practice is coming face to face with the experience. We're tracking the experience over time—we'll talk more about this tomorrow night. And in each moment, what we're doing is trying to be as clear as possible: this is the experience. And that includes this is my relationship to it.

Remember we talked about the basic dyad. There's the process of awareing and there's the object of awareness. There's always that dyad—there's the knowing and that which is known. So my relationship to this which I know, this which I'm aware of, is dominated by this clinging. But I can even see it in the process of awareing: the very way in which I know this experience is infected.

So I get interested in the whole process, and what I'm trying to do is simply be as clear and as intimate as possible with this whole process. The experience is just the experience. The awareing of it is just the awareing of it. That's all. Not adding anything extra.

So every time I note a meditation object, what I'm doing is creating a clean, clear relationship as much as possible to this experience right now. When the practice develops to some degree, we get a sense of what this means.

Sometimes people will report that after a few days of a meditation retreat, they go outside and suddenly realize, "Wow, the trees are green and the birds are doing what they're doing, and the bees are buzzing and the breeze is cool." Sometimes people will just stop and just look at nature or just listen to what's going on, and everything seems completely fresh, new. Have you ever had that kind of experience?

This indicates that mindfulness is getting stronger. That's one of the tell-tale signs. But notice that if you look at the nature of that experience, the nature of that relationship, it's much more clean than normal.

The classic one is: I've heard that the sunset is very beautiful from this particular view. So I go there to watch the sunset. And all the time, the mind's buzzing: "Oh, this is nice. This is quite nice. This isn't as nice as people say it is. It's not quite as nice as people say it is, but it's rather nice. And I must tell somebody about it." Or the 20th and 21st century equivalent: "How can I get a good photograph of it?"

That versus just, "Oh, that's what it is."

That second one has an intimacy to it. There's a directness and an intimacy and a dropping of the agenda,

the habitual agendas.

When that starts to happen—well, first of all, the training is from the very beginning to cultivate that kind of relationship. So this is what it means to note something: "Okay, it's just this. That's all it is. It's just this."

And when this gets momentum, we get a sense of what it actually means when we have these kinds of experiences where things are much more simple, clean, clear. That gives us a sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he's talking about nibbāna. It's like the fire is going down a bit, and we get a hint of what it will be like when the fire drops away completely and that becomes the new normal.

So what we're doing is moving towards that. This is the one-way street. We're heading in that direction all the time. And it's all about our relationship to experience. What is this now?

So you can see there's a radical simplicity to it. This practice is radically simple. It can appear complicated—lots of different instructions about different aspects of the practice—but what it boils down to is a radical simplicity.

Mahāsī Sayādaw wrote these little books about how to do this practice. He's got primary objects and secondary objects and this kind of object and that other kind of object and this kind of meditation exercise and that kind of meditation exercise. But when he actually describes what is satipaṭṭhāna meditation, he says it's the practice of noting whatever arises in any of the six sense doors as it arises.

The doubt I had went away."

"Oh, good."

"You see, if we completely stopped thinking and knowing who we are, it's not so much that we'd be dead, but having had a father with dementia, I would hate not to know who I am and not to think."

"Did I say we completely stopped thinking? No. Let me answer my own question. No, it was more that nibbana would be like this."

"No, nibbana is where we do not believe our thinking. We do not take our thinking about what's happening to be what's happening. That's a big difference.

The example I like to give is that the Buddha has this concept of nimitta, which literally means, or one translation is, sign. And nimitta is something which indicates something else, something which points to something else.

So outside this center there's a sign that says Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center. Now let's say you're coming to the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center and you see the sign and you stand there. And you wait. And you look around and you think, where is everyone? What's wrong with these people? I'm supposed to be meditating at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center and it says Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center and there's no one here.

And if someone explained to you, 'Look, it's a sign. Right? It's not the center. The center's just over here.'

But we are like the people who stand underneath the sign wondering where everybody is. That's taking the thought about X to be X. But it isn't. The one thing that the sign is not is what it points to. Because otherwise it couldn't point to it. It couldn't do its job of indicating where it is.

So there's a gap between the concept and the actuality. And the thing about that gap is you cannot fill it in with a concept. And that's what we want to do, especially when we're academically trained. But we don't actually need to fill in that gap. It's a very comfortable place to live.

And it's not that we don't think, and it's not that things don't have meaning. It's just that we know that fundamentally the meaning is false."

And that gives us a great deal of freedom.

"Is that like the difference between the menu and the meal?"

Yes, very much so. I don't really need to know the menu if I'm hungry enough right now. But if I know the menu and I think I know what the meal ought to be, and I'm served something else, maybe I'll be unhappy about it. Well, the menu has served its purpose once you're chopping away, but it was useful because it helped you choose. So it's not that concepts are not useful—of course they're useful, they're necessary—but they're not what they are about.

What we tend to do is we stop at the concept. And when we do that, we miss what they are about.

"Don't you sometimes go along and you may let go of one concept but then put another one there?"

Yes, that's what we do. So the concepts arise, but it's the relationship to the concept which is crucial. You're more flexible. For example, with thinking—I could try to stop thinking. Let's say I'm meditating and my thinking is really bugging me, so I try to suppress thought. Some people can actually do it, that's one thing, but at best it's a temporary solution.

The other solution is I could allow the mind to think, but when a thought arises, I just recognize it as: this is just a thought. That's all it is. And when that happens, the mind naturally calms down. I don't have to do anything. It just calms down. I find that I think less, but the thoughts that I do think are much better quality, and I have a whole different relationship to my thoughts. I'm not so eager to believe them.

So let's say I'm anticipating something in the future, and I think I know what it's going to be, and therefore I've decided how I'm going to respond. But then when I get there, I discover it's actually not what I thought it would be. In my case, it's never what I thought it would be. But I can find myself reacting according to the script that I've already written for myself because I'm so locked into my concepts.

But what if even when I had the concept of what it's going to be, I didn't actually believe it? I knew: no, this is just a concept arising now. It's got nothing to do with what will happen later on. Then that concept

would not have any power over me. It would be just the mind playing, doing what it does. And I wouldn't take it seriously. And I'd have a whole different relationship to it.

Thank you very much for listening.

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