# The Sweet Essence - Part 2

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:02:36

Last night we explored the first part of the Madhupindika Sutta, "The Sweet Essence"—one of the more challenging yet fascinating discourses. We began with the Buddha meditating when Dandapani approached him with arrogance and aggression, questioning his teaching. The Buddha responded with the full force of his wisdom, but Dandapani, not understanding, simply rejected what he couldn't comprehend and walked away. Rather than pausing to ask questions and seeking understanding, he chose dismissal.

The Buddha returned home and recounted this encounter, including the teaching he had given. The monks, unlike Dandapani, acknowledged their confusion and asked for clarification. When they still didn't grasp the meaning after his expansion, they approached Mahakaccana, who was foremost among the disciples in explaining in detail what had been given in brief. After gently scolding them for not pressing the Buddha further, Mahakaccana offered his famous exposition.

He systematically examined each of the six senses, but let us focus on the final one: mind. "Depending on mind sensitivity and phenomena, mind awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feelings. What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate. Because of what we have proliferated, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation regarding past, future and present."

Essentially, Mahakaccana illuminated the process by which we begin with elemental experience—occurring right now through all six senses—and then follow a trajectory that creates a kind of prison through obsessive conceptualizing. We cling to these concepts and mistake our ideas about what's happening for what's actually happening. We construct a prison from our concepts, driven by completely uncontrolled proliferation—the mind simply spewing forth endless mental formations. We lose touch with the world of direct experience, living as though in a dream without recognizing we're dreaming.

After mapping this process of entrapment, Mahakaccana explained the path of awakening from this dream—which is our focus tonight.

This represents a central aspect of our practice. What we do is study our dreams and observe ourselves creating them, thereby constructing our prison—what we consider normal, what we take to be real, and the limitations each of us experiences within this supposed reality. Through becoming truly intimate with this entire process of creating a self—an imprisoned, suffering self—the very act of seeing clearly begins to dismantle it. Cracks appear in the edifice, and we can work with these openings, gradually teasing them

apart until the whole structure begins to collapse.

The ultimate process, which we'll explore fully, doesn't eliminate concepts entirely, for they remain fundamental to navigating the world. The crucial difference lies in understanding that a concept is simply a concept. Think of a concept as a sign in front of a building. Outside this center stands a sign reading "Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center." Are those words themselves the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center? Certainly not—they never could be; it's impossible. Yet does this render the sign useless? Not at all. The sign serves its purpose perfectly, especially for first-time visitors driving along the street who see it and think, "Ah, Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre—this is the place."

Concepts are both useful and necessary, but from the Buddha's perspective, to fulfill their true purpose, we must understand their real nature. We need to recognize that a concept is a concept, and what it points toward is something else entirely—something different.

Mahakaccana began this inquiry into what lies beneath what we think is really happening.

In other words, what do we find underneath the concept, underneath the dream?

Mahakassapa continues his analysis, and you'll notice that his entire inquiry in this sutta is based on the six sense fields. He's still using this fundamental template.

He says—and he does this for each of the sense fields—when there are eye sensitivity, forms, and visual awareness, we find a ground for conceptualizing contact. So if you have eye sensitivity, you have visual forms, you have visual awareness, that's where we find a ground for conceptualizing contact.

You notice he doesn't say the meeting of the three is contact. He's coming at it from a different angle. The standard teaching says the meeting of the three is contact. But here, Mahakassapa is saying where you have those three things, you find a ground for conceptualizing contact.

And then he goes on: where there is a ground for conceptualizing contact, we find a ground for conceptualizing feeling. Where there is a ground for conceptualizing feeling, we find a ground for conceptualizing perception. Where there is a ground for conceptualizing perception, we find a ground for conceptualizing thinking. Where there is a ground for conceptualizing thinking, we find a ground for conceptualizing concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation.

So you get this multi-layered cake, which he's gone through before, but now he's looking at it from a different angle. The first layer, the second, the third, the fourth—boom, boom, boom. Previously he was talking about it from the perspective of how we create a person who is a victim of circumstances beyond their control and is harassed, endlessly harassed by these proliferations, caught in self, caught in time.

Here he's going through the same multi-layered cake, but he's looking at it in terms of its radical simplicity of ground and concept. *Thana* and *paññatti.* And here we have two more technical terms.

What's ground? *Thana*. And *paññatti*—conceptualizing.

First of all, ground. Now, as soon as Mahakassapa says that, everybody in the audience knows he's talking about dependent arising. It always comes back to dependent arising.

Back in the eighties, I spent a fair bit of time at Wat Suan Mok, and was influenced by the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadasa. He really emphasized the centrality of dependent arising and he said: if you understand dependent arising you understand what the Buddha is talking about; if you do not understand dependent arising you do not understand what the Buddha is talking about. It's really that simple. And you can see that again and again—it all comes back to this.

We've talked about dependent arising. Its basic message is that experiences arise dependent upon other experiences. So if something happens, the arising of that something depends upon something else. And when it ceases, its cessation depends upon something else. So everything is embedded in this multi-dimensional network.

Now, for something to arise, for something to happen, it needs a base, a foundation, a ground. It has to be located somewhere. It has to be founded on something. Otherwise it could not manifest.

Let's take as an example this teaching of contact, the immediacy of experience. Contact is the coming together of sensitivity, sense object, and their corresponding awareness. We've spoken about this on a number of occasions.

Notice how this is structured. You have three elements, each one grounded on the other two. And together, when they come together and they ground each other, then—bang—something happens.

So you've got a network of events, and each event—sensitivity, awareness, sense object—is grounded on something else. Take for example awareness. We've been working with awareness all through the retreat. When I am aware, I am aware of something. It's not particularly controversial, is it?

So another way of looking at it is awareness is grounded on its object. It needs that object in order to exist. Awareness is grounded in the other direction.

For there to be awareness of an object, there has to be a corresponding sensitivity that can pick it up. Take, for example, hearing. There's awareness of sound, which has to be grounded on the sound itself. But equally on the other side, it has to be grounded on the hearing sensitivity.

Now let's say you change the hearing sensitivity. There are species, of course, that hear sounds that we do not, because their hearing sensitivity operates at a different frequency. So there are species that are hearing things that to us is silence. And maybe it's vice versa. Maybe we hear things that other species don't hear. Because for the experience to arise, it's got to be grounded.

So with awareness itself there are two sides. It's grounded on the object, but it's also grounded back on the

sensitivity itself. And this sensitivity grounds the whole thing.

Now all of this is just natural process, and as we said, there's absolutely no problem with it—it's just nature. But what happens when we place too much importance on what grounds experience?

Let's look at, for example, the six sensitivities: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Where are the first five? Well, they have specific location. Here. So seeing can only occur here. Hearing can only occur here. Touching can occur throughout the whole body, but it can only occur here. It cannot occur there. It's grounded here.

Mind is a bit trickier. Does mind actually have location? There's a sense in which it feels like it does, in that when I think, sometimes I have the sense of thinking here. But at other times, if I get lost in a fantasy, it separates from here. We've been talking about this—the role of mindfulness of body. Part of it is to keep the thinking process itself grounded on the five physical senses. So this experience is grounded. It's here.

But what if I take the ground too seriously? What if I take as real: "Well, if it's grounded here, there must be someone here who's doing all this. So here I am—this is me, this is the soul"? And if there are concepts going on, these concepts must be grounded on me. They must be about me. And if they're about past and future, they must be about my past and future. And so we become obsessed with our particular stories.

So that's ground. Then you get concept paññatti. When there is eye-sensitivity, forms, and visual awareness, we find a ground for conceptualizing contact. When there is a ground for conceptualizing contact, we find a ground for conceptualizing feeling.

Now concept here always has the implication of meaning. Concepts give meaning. They tell us what it means—what the experience actually means, what its significance is. And for there to be meaning, there has to be some degree of interpretation.

So let's say a thought. A thought pops up. I can conceptualize that as "this is a thought." Or I could conceptualize it as "this is just a thought." Now the meaning is different. And with that different meaning, there's a whole different relationship.

If I'm a meditator and I have this: "Oh, this is just a thought," I'm not putting anything extra on it. It's just a thought. It doesn't signify anything else. Or the thought arises and my concept might be "this is my thought and it's about me."

So the only difference is the meaning that I put on it, and the meaning is just a concept. So I change the concept and I change the significance of the experience, and everything that follows from that.

Concept is very important. The concept creates the world of meaning. What I think—even what I assume is going on—is all created by concept.

Now what Mahākaccāna is doing here, he's pointing out the ubiquity of concept.

It goes incredibly deep into the mind. Mahākāčana talks about contact, feeling, and perception—the really basic, fundamental movements of the mind that create an experienced world. But he's pointing out that when you look at what we actually do, we conceptualize contact, we conceptualize perception, we conceptualize feeling. We're adding something to it all the time because we're imposing an interpretation on it. It has to mean something. And that is the realm of concept.

But what this does is cut off the simple immediacy of contact, perception, and feeling. Yesterday we talked about how it's like cling wrap that's been wrapped over the experience. There's something getting in the way. It's not completely clean. There's a degree of alienation there. And this sense of alienation goes extremely deep.

How does labeling the experience fit with this when we're using the Mahasi method? If you identify with the labels or get stuck on them, you've got serious problems. The labels are meant to simply direct awareness, to aim the awareness. To do this kind of work, the awareness and attention have got to be very refined.

How do I develop a refined attention? I start by working with the obvious, but I learn to aim as precisely as possible the awareness through the act of attention. The name, the label, is all about the aim. At some point, it gets in the way, and then you drop it. If you need it again, you use it again. But if it gets in the way, you drop it.

The classic instance of getting in the way is if you're doing the standard Mahasi three-step—lifting, pushing, placing—and then at some point you realize you're going "lifting, pushing, placing, lifting, pushing, placing, lifting." What's happened is that you're using the concept to aim awareness, but instead of awareness going to the actual experience, it's gone to the concept, gone to the name. You've got a kind of bizarre mantra. The ease with which this happens demonstrates the ease with which we get lost in concept, how we mistake the concept of the event for the event itself. This is something that becomes clearer the more refined awareness becomes—you can see this process happening at deeper levels.

The actual label is part of perception, isn't it? Perception includes recognition, which is a kind of deeper, more unconscious labeling. But that's different from what we're talking about here—taking a name and consciously using it.

For example, do you think right now that you can see me? That's a concept. And yet it seems real, seems to be the actual thing. But it's a concept—hopefully a useful concept.

Mahākāčana points out that this whole process requires a ground, needs to be grounded on something. We assume that what we take to be real is solid, but we can't maintain that perception unless the ground on which it's based is also solid. But what is the ground? If we actually search for the ground, what do we find?

We looked at contact, the immediacy of experience. The ground there is a dynamic interrelationship

between three phenomena: sensitivity, sense object, and awareness, each of them grounded upon the other two. In other words, it's like a house of cards with no table underneath it.

This is the very foundation. And all it is, is this little house of cards. Pull out one card, the whole thing collapses, and there's nothing underneath it. So where's the ground?

This is what Mahāpajjhāna then starts talking about. When there is no eye sensitivity, no form and no visual awareness, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing contact. When there is no ground for conceptualizing contact, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing feeling. When there is no ground for conceptualizing feeling, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing perception. When there is no ground for conceptualizing perception, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing thinking. When there is no ground for conceptualizing thinking, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation.

Here he's pulling the rug out. This "no," this "not," tells us that we're in the area of anattā—not-self—and śūnyatā, emptiness. This is the realm of the not, the no. What he's specifically talking about here is the cessation of the sense fields, and therefore the cessation of everything else that is built up on top of them. No eye sensitivity, no form, no visual awareness. Cut, cut, cut.

Now if there is no eye sensitivity, no ear sensitivity, no nose sensitivity, no tongue sensitivity, no body sensitivity, and no mind sensitivity, what does that mean? Dead.

So is he saying, "Look, don't worry, I can solve all your problems. Line up here. Single bullet to the head. Guarantee no further problems"? No, he's not saying that. He's saying something quite different, but quite challenging.

To get a sense of what he's talking about, let's look at another discourse—a discussion between Mahākoṭṭhita and Sāriputta. They were friends, and there are a number of discourses where after a day's meditation they gather in the evening and have a little chat. Some of these chats became suttas. In this particular evening, what they're talking about is what happens—they're talking about the cessation of the six fields of contact. In other words, what Mahākaccāyana is talking about.

Specifically, what remains, what's left over after the six fields of contact fade away and finally cease? What's left? What is there?

Mahākoṭṭhita asks Sāriputta, "Is there something still left?" And Sāriputta replies, "Ma hevaṃ"—which could be translated as "Not that."

"Well then, is there nothing left?" "Not that."

"Is there both something and nothing left?" "Not that."

"Neither something nor nothing left?" "Not that."

What Mahākoṭṭhita is presenting are the four logical possibilities: A, not A, neither A nor not A, both A and not A. These are the four possibilities. There's nothing outside of that range of possibilities. Is there something left? Is there something not left? Is there something both left and not left behind? Is there something neither left nor not left? All possibilities are covered, and he gets the same answer each time: "Ma hevaṃ"—"Not that."

Now this answer is interesting. It's not simply "no." If you break it up, it becomes ma plus hi plus evaṃ. Evaṃ is emphatic, hi is emphatic, and ma is a prohibition. It's both a prohibitive denial and an emphatic denial. It's both "no" and "don't even go there."

Don't even go there. That does not apply when the Buddha was asked similar questions. It's a different response, coming at it from a different angle, but much more emphatic. It's just boom! That does not apply.

This is more like philosophical discussion elsewhere, but here it's not "don't do that"—it's like bang. Much more direct. It's got a certain Zen flavor to it. And Sariputta goes on to explain, which is not very Zen, because in Zen they would never explain.

He says: "To say that there is something left after the six fields of contact cease without remainder is to proliferate what should not be proliferated"—where you could say it's to complicate what should not be complicated. "To say that there is not something left, that there both is and is not something left, that there is neither something left nor nothing left after the six fields of contact cease without remainder is to proliferate what should not be proliferated, is to complicate what should not be complicated."

In other words, you're just adding another concept on top of it.

"As far as the six fields of contact extend, that is the range of proliferation. And as far as the range of proliferation extends, that is the range of the six fields of contact. From the fading away and cessation without remainder of the six fields of contact, there is the cessation of proliferation only"—the calming of proliferation.

These terms—cessation (nirodha) and calming (upasamati)—both indicate nibbana. They both indicate awakening.

What do they mean by the cessation of sense contact? I'm sure they don't mean that we should be blind and deaf. Well, let's have a little Zen story to try to explain this.

This is from Case 20 of the Book of Serenity. Lohan Kuichen asks Fayan Wenyi, "Where are you going?"

This is the context of the story. In China, in the Chan tradition, and even today in Korea in the Seon tradition, the basic rhythm of meditation monks and nuns is that each year they have a summer retreat and a winter retreat, each lasting three months. If you're a meditation monk or nun in these traditions, you spend six months of every year in intensive retreats—three months on, then a break for three

months. Three-month retreat, break for three. Three-month retreat, break for three. And you do that for however many years you want to keep doing that.

At the end of each retreat, people scatter. They go on pilgrimage, quote-unquote. Now, pilgrimage could be anything. It could be "Let me out of here, I'm going to take a holiday." Or it could be "Now I've got to go to the study monastery and study sutras and Vinaya." Or it could be "Now I've got to go to the fields and put some work in." Or whatever. Or it could be "For the next retreat I want to go to another monastery where there's another teacher," and you could be doing the rounds. It could be anything.

Lohan is the teacher and Fayan is one of the students—a senior student. So at the end of the retreat, people are leaving, Fayan is leaving, and Lohan says, "Where are you going?"

It's an innocent question, which in Zen context is never innocent. Equally, the question "Where are you coming from?" is never an innocent question.

Fayan said, "I am on pilgrimage, following the wind." So he's got no specific plan. It's not that he's got a fixed idea of what he's going to do. He's following the wind.

Lohan said, "What are you on pilgrimage for?"

So what's your purpose in doing this?

Fa Yen said, "I don't know."

Lo Han said, "Not knowing is most intimate."

Fa Yan suddenly attained great awakening.

Do you get a sense of what's going on here? If there's no laying of any concept on it, that is complete intimacy. And with intimacy, awakening can come.

Of course, Fa Yen was ripe. He'd been doing a lot of meditation. And of course, Lo Han knew he was ripe. He knew Fa Yen just needed a shove.

It's very common, for example, that in the context of a retreat, people often say that when insight arises, it arises more often in walking and daily activity than in sitting—because the pressure's off. Equally, people will say that insight often arises after a retreat. Again, when the pressure's off.

So Fa Yen had been in a pressure cooker for three months. And just when he's leaving, that's when the teacher pounces. And because he's so ripe, Fa Yen gets it. Not knowing is most intimate. No concept added on top of it. Nothing getting in the way.

And this is what Sariputta is getting at. He says, to give any answer to that, to create any concept about it, you are just complicating what should not be complicated. You are proliferating what should not be

proliferated. The question itself is just more proliferation, much less any answer.

Any concept or description that we produce as an answer has to be grounded on something. But Sariputta is speaking about a state in which there is no ground for anything at all.

This brings me back to the question from last night a little bit: Where does planning fit in with this? Or procedural memories like the memory of how to walk? Or like, say the Buddha wanted to go to a certain city so that he could go and spread the word there. He had to plan that in his mind.

That's right. And as he was planning it in his mind, he was quite clear it's just a plan in his mind. His self wasn't wrapped up in that. No, and he had no investment in the reality of that future event. He didn't mistake his concept of that possible future event to be real. It was just a thought, a plan coming up in the present. It was just mental activity happening now. That's it.

How does that fit with the cessation of all sense stuff?

That's actually what we're talking about. The conceptualization, the imposition of meaning that gets in the way—it gets in the way because we hold to the ground. We get ourselves mixed up in it. We think, "This is me. Ah, this is content." Bang. We've just put a concept on it. And we hold on to the concept and we believe the concept to be true. And all of our energy is going to the concept and not to the actual experience.

The experience is a sense of cleanness where you're not putting anything on it at all, where in that intimacy there is no felt sense of past, of future, of present, or even of purpose. It's just the activity itself. "I'm just doing it." Not even the "I"—that gets in the way. There's just the doing. There's just the activity.

The first time I got a sense of this was actually long before I got involved with Buddhism—back in my misspent youth, when I did acting classes. The classes were in what was called the Method, developed by the Russian Stanislavski, who I've recently discovered was actually influenced by yoga and Buddhism. Buddhism has been part of Russian culture for centuries, from Central Asia.

In these classes, we would do exercises in a theatre in the round, with students gathered around and the teachers observing. The teacher would give the class an exercise, and anybody could get up and have a go. It might be something like: look for something and then find it. So you're on this stage with everyone watching, and you simply look for something and then find it.

The highest praise you could receive was that it was "a clean action." In other words, you were not acting *as if* you were looking for something and finding it. As far as any external observer could see, you *were* looking for something and then you found it. There was nothing put on top. That putting on top—they called that acting. A layer on top of the action.

When you actually did it—when you were on stage doing this exercise—you always knew if you were clean or not clean. The difference was so obvious you didn't need to be told. But when you were clean, there was a smoothness and a beauty to it that was really quite extraordinary.

That was the first time I got a taste of this, and I was reminded of it years later when I was doing meditation and things began to come together. Just recently, when I was doing my own meditation retreat in Malaysia—I do these self-retreats in a hut—every day I clean the hut and the veranda. First I sweep, then I mop.

One day I was mopping, trying to be continuously mindful, and I was just doing the mopping. Suddenly I realized what the Zen expression meant when they said to do something "with your hands empty." There was no mop and there was no veranda and there was no one mopping the veranda. It was just so obvious. But of course, as soon as you put a concept on it, it starts to crumble.

So this is what's meant here by cessation. It's not cessation in the sense that you don't see, you don't hear, and so forth. It's cessation of any concept about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and so on. You're not putting anything on it.

But here's the paradox: if you're not putting anything on it, it's not cessation—because if you say, "That's cessation," you've just added something. You've just stuck in a concept. If you say, "Oh, that's contact," bang—you've just put something on it. If you say, "It's not contact," bang—you've just put something on it. And so forth. It's the dropping of all that which is the cessation of everything.

A student asked: "What about perceptions? I was thinking, when you said you look at me, you're looking at Patrick as a concept. If I was to walk along a street and see you coming in the distance—seeing a person coming in the distance, and then I'm looking at this person, and suddenly I have recognition. That's perception. But then from that perception comes proliferation, conceptualizing—as you realize how lucky you are that you've bumped into him. But the perception... does that fall away as well?"

You know, perceptions aren't falling away. We have perceptions. I need to have a memory of you to recognize that it's Patrick. And I actually say, "Oh, it's Patrick." I can be aware of the perception. It's the same as when I'm in the dark looking at something and I can't quite make it out... "Oh, it's a cup."

What this is talking about is the cleanness of the experience of it. It's the dropping away of any barrier.

Well, you could say it's the dropping away, in this case, of perception-perception. The perception. It's like the extra bit added on. Oh, I'm perceiving. So it's taking everything away except the natural process. But the natural process includes everything that the mind-body does. So it includes walking down the street, recognizing someone, going up, having a chat, and so on.

In one of the emptiness suttas in Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha talks about how it's in a state of emptiness that he can do things like the work involved in being a Buddha and talk to kings and to potentates and to businessmen and to followers and so on. When he does that, when he's being engaged in worldly activities, he enters into a state of emptiness in order to be able to do that most effectively. Which means that when it's happening, he's not getting in the way.

Does that make any sense?

Yeah, it makes sense. I'm just processing it in my mind, the cleanness of perceptions.

And along with that, the cleanness of action.

Yes.

Again, this comes out in the Zen stories, the way that they're structured. So you have a story in which a student goes to the teacher to find out what's going on, but doesn't understand the encounter, because it's really weird, gives up, decides he's going to leave, and he's advised, well, at least say goodbye to the teacher. So he goes in and he says goodbye to the teacher, and the teacher says, oh, you should go, well, then go and see so-and-so, and refers him to another teacher. And he goes to this other teacher, he has an encounter with the other teacher in which he realizes what's going on and he has his great awakening and he comes back to the first one.

Now in the midst of all this, you have that, when he goes to see the first teacher to say, I'm out of here, I'm going. And the teacher says, oh, well go and see someone else. Did that teacher plan that statement? Did he have this as a policy option in the file to deal with this particular student? No. It just came out. There was no planning. He didn't think about it. He says, well do this. And it turned out to be the thing which helped stimulate the awakening of that student.

Or let's say when I'm doing the interviews someone comes in and they present me with their story. And what I have to do is listen very carefully and try to say something useful. Before I say something, usually I've got no idea what I'm going to say. Zero. But while the person is speaking, I have a sense of, I have to try to sort this out so I can say something useful, then probably what I will say will not be particularly good. But if there's none of that, if I'm just listening and just seeing, and then I just say something, that's when I'm at my best. And often I surprise myself. Like, where did that come from? I don't know where that came from.

So this is... It's an action which is clean because it's not adding any conceptual overlay on the purity of the experience. This is what they're talking about when they talk about clear attention.

Is that sati? I think somebody said that that's what it is, bare attention, seeing things as they are. But that's always easy to understand and practice when there's the five senses, the five physical senses. When it comes to mind, bare attention on mental objects is one thing that I do with, what I intend to do with settling in with this mind, this natural state, where I just open my eyes and I watch my mind. And just let... concepts be concepts so I think that comes back to that bare attention with mental objects bare attention with like seeing you perceiving Patrick bare attention with that just to see it as Patrick just Patrick without adding further on to it without adding on oh here comes Patrick blah blah blah so then when you have an encounter with someone there's a spontaneity there which would otherwise not be there.

So could this be an example where in English there actually is already a translation? Because it sort of sounds like a lack of self-consciousness. And self-consciousness could be like a made-up Pali translation, only it's not. Self-consciousness in the sense of... Some of what you're talking about is when you're not suffering from self-consciousness it's a lot easier to do things. Self-consciousness can be seen as consciousness of oneself with paranoia added.

There's a quality of paranoia to it or even yes an imagined other maybe rather than necessarily paranoia yeah so what if you had could you have self consciousness without any imagined other would that be possible sometimes the imagined other is there laughing.

But could you have self-consciousness without any imagined other? Would it still be self-consciousness?

I'm thinking about the concept and the thing of being locked or freed from concept. So if I'm in a room and the door's locked and I can't get out, I'm a prisoner of that conceptual room. If the door is unlocked, it doesn't mean I can't use the room anymore. It just means I'm free to come and go.

I've just moved back to my old hometown and am meeting people who haven't seen me for ten, fifteen, and twenty years. I really see the difference between people who are locked into the concept of who I am versus those who are free from that conceptual prison. Some people respond to me because they're completely locked into their concept of who they think I am from twenty years ago. They're completely trapped in that framework, and I'm not that person anymore.

Other people recognize me—perception is there, they know me as a person they knew—but because they're not locked into the concept of who I was, they're open to experiencing who I am now. So it's: "You're the person I recognize, who are you?" There's that openness to the direct experience of what is, while still being able to use the conceptual framework of recognition.

So it's using concepts, not being used by them. That's essentially what we're talking about. Hence with the awakened ones—just because they're not locked into concepts doesn't mean they can't use them.

One of the implications of this is that you have two approaches. There's the "let's clean out the consciousness" approach—like dipping a bucket into the ocean and repeatedly throwing away our delusions and attachments, trying to get them all out. Or you can cut through the whole mass by not identifying. They're there, but by not identifying with any of them, you slice clean through. That's a whole different move.

But it requires—and this is why this practice is so central—that intimacy is something we start with by patiently cultivating over time. If you look at our story with Fa Yen, he had who knows how many years of hard work, but at some point, "Oh, got it." These moments meditators routinely report—suddenly this flash of seeing when things drop away and it's all clear. This is the insight side, but the serenity is the patient working away, being intimate.

So dropping away the proliferation—dropping it, recognizing it, dropping it, recognizing it, dropping it. This is the humdrum day-to-day work of meditation practice. But at some point the process ripens and then something falls away.

You mentioned that often the insight comes and the pressure is off, and you were wondering whether there's a link with effort. Often wrong effort comes from a concept—a concept of what it should be, what should be here, what should not be here. "This experience is not good enough, I've got to somehow push through it to get to..." Or "I should not be thinking this, so I've got to suppress it."

Underlying that is a concept of who the meditator should be, what the meditation practice should be, what the experience should be. But it's just a concept. Giving up those concepts, there's definitely a link with effort. When we're in a world of concepts, it's much harder, if not impossible, to find right effort.

Right effort in its purity is associated with the dropping away of these concepts. But it's a gradual process—you become more refined with it over time. This is the serenity aspect—working on it bit by bit, getting better and better and better at it. But then there's the insight side, where it ripens and suddenly—bang—"Ah, that's what it is."

So there are the two sides: the practice side and the realization side. The serenity and the insight. What we can do is the serenity.

So Mahākaccāna gives this teaching and the bhikkhus, if I recall correctly, are reasonably pleased.

And the next day they report all of this to the Buddha. The Buddha approves, saying, "Yes, I would have said the same thing except I just wanted to bugger off and watch some TV."

Then Ananda says to the Buddha—Bhante, Ananda was the Buddha's younger cousin, probably about twenty years younger than the Buddha, and he served as the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty years of his life—Ananda says, "Bhante, just as one exhausted by hunger and weakness coming upon a honey ball, a madhu pindika, would find a sweet, delectable flavor when he tasted it, so too, any practitioner with a good heart who investigates the meaning of this dharma discourse with wisdom would find joy and inspiration in his heart. Bhante, what is the name of this dharma discourse?"

"As to that, Ananda, you may remember this dharma discourse as the Honeyball Discourse, or the Discourse of the Sweet Essence, Madhu Pindika Sutta."

This again is interesting. These discourses were often named at the time. "Wow, that was interesting. What would we call this one?" Marketing. But in particular, the Buddha says, "You may remember this dharma discourse as..."—in other words, you're going to recite this. So they craft a form for recitation and now you can give it a name. What shall we call it? They're creating teaching as they go.

Now the sweet essence—what is this sweet essence? Well, of course it's the essence of absolutely no essence whatsoever. It's the unconditioned. It's the taste of nibbana itself. Nothing at all to write home

about.

That's enough for tonight. Thank you.

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