The Insight Chorus Part 2

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Last night we started talking about the insight chorus of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. We said how the discourse itself acts as a kind of technical workbook for this practice. It has twenty-one different sections, and each section ends in a chorus where the chorus talks about insight—the arising of insight. In English translation, this chorus is quite brief: four sentences. Last night we covered the first three, which leaves one for tonight.

So we'll start from the beginning. "In this way she lives, tracking body as body internally, or tracking body as body externally, or tracking body as body, both internally and externally." Tracking body as body means this physical experience is just this physical experience. It's not what I'm projecting into it. It's not what I want about it. It isn't what I want it to do. It isn't what I don't want it to do. It's just a physical experience. Here the sutta talks about internally and externally—the fading away of the absolute distinction between self and other, here and there, that begins to drop away as the meditation practice deepens. Things start to loosen up.

"She lives tracking the nature of arising as body, or tracking the nature of ceasing as body, or tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body." Here you get a shift into insight, unambiguously, where what's being tracked is not body, but the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing. In other words, change—impermanence, the universal characteristic of impermanence. What becomes the meditation object is actually the universal characteristic of change, and technically this is where insight meditation begins. Of course, if the universal characteristic of change is evident, then the other two characteristics are also evident: dukkha and not-self. But one may be more predominant, more obvious.

"Further, mindfulness is established as body is, just for understanding, just for continuity of mindfulness." Here we're talking about the radical simplicity of both the practice and the realization. The rain is wet. That's it. It's just this experience now, with no reference to anything else. It's not for anything. It's just what it is.

And then we have the final sentence: "And she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world." This living independently is the maturity of the practice. Notice that what the Buddha is talking about is a way of life, not a meditation technique. And "not clinging" indicates there's nothing further to be gained. The destination of the path has been reached, and the practitioner has no sense of lack, of anything missing. The practitioner, you could say, is entirely intimate.

So let's get a sense of what this independence means. We start with where we are, which is before

independence. We could ask the question: why do we undertake the practice? What are we doing here? We undertake the practice because we want something. We don't want what we have now; we want something better to replace it. Desire is the basis of effort. What this implies is that our relationship to experience is dominated by the sense of "what's in this for me? What do I get out of this?" We find ourselves habitually judging our experience to see whether it's good enough—and in particular, good enough to suit our agenda, to actualize the fantasies that we have regarding the future.

And this implies a relationship to the practice which is ruled by what the Buddha calls *taṇhā* and *avijjā*—craving and delusion. Because we're always pushing forward into an imagined future to get something that we think we're missing right now.

So this brings up our relationship to time, which we've talked about. When our practice is supported by a sense of something to be gained or something to be lost, time becomes real. We find ourselves resisting what is happening now because we think what happened before is more important, or what may happen later is more important—and even more real than what's going on right now. So we don't fully commit to what's happening now, because this now we see only as the prelude to something more significant.

But when we are intimate, this experience now is already enough. There's nothing more to gain. There's no thought of anything to come later, or even anything that happened before. Time dissolves, in the sense that any felt sense of past or future dissolves. And when past and future dissolve, of course the concept of the present dissolves, because the concept of the present only makes sense compared to past and future. So time dissolves, and we may even feel that there's no sense that anything alternative to this is even possible—and certainly it's not needed.

This is the kind of progression that the Buddha is talking about. And it brings in the sense of independence. "She lives independently." Now, this translates the word *anissita*. *A* means the negative—not *nissita*—where *nissita* means dependent on, attached to, supported by. And when we see this term, it's clear that what the Buddha was talking about is dependent arising. This is his basic framework, and it teaches that whatever we experience arises because of conditions other than itself. Whatever happens is conditioned by something else. In other words, it's dependent on, supported by those conditions. If this condition arises, this experience arises. But without those conditions, this experience will not arise. So this experience is dependent on these conditions, and the reality of a dependent event or experience is inseparable from the reality of what supports it.

For example, my sense of self. Now, this may come as a surprise to you, but I think I am real. In part because you think I'm real, and you treat me as if I'm real, and you are certainly real, and you're sitting around listening to me—so I must be real. Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? So there's the external support.

And there's an internal support: my thoughts about myself. Who I am, how I got here, what I'm going to do next—these thoughts seem real. The drama of my life and the emotions flowing through the heart, these seem to be real. So I must be real. And of course, my possessions seem real. These clothes seem real. This

body seems real. And if they are real, they give me reality because I'm the owner of them. So the sense of self is dependent upon other events, other conditions, and it's a product of those conditions coming together. It is dependent. Does that make sense?

So the opposite is independence. How does the Buddha speak about this? There's one interesting little bit in Majjhima 22, the *Alagaddūpamasutta*, the simile of the snake. He gives the example of how the devas fail to find an awakened one, someone whose citta is fully liberated. He says that when the devas—including Indra, Brahma, and Pajāpati—look for a practitioner whose citta is liberated, they cannot get hold of anything that an awakened one's awareness depends on. So the devas, when they've got nothing better to do, are looking out in the world.

And they've heard about a practitioner whose heart is liberated, so they go looking. But they cannot find this person, because they cannot get hold of anything that an awakened one's awareness depends on. Why? Because an awakened one is unknowable right here and now.

So what he's saying is that an awakened one cannot be known. Because to know her, to find her, to establish her as real, we have to find what her inner state depends upon. What supports her inner state, her citta? What is her inner state grounded on? In other words, what does she cling to in her inner state? What does her inner state organize itself around?

The devas have a perception that is greatly superior to that of humans, and when they perceive a being, they look into their minds and they discern the personality that animates the body. But when it comes to awakened ones, all the devas can actually perceive is a body moving around—they cannot find what she is clinging to, what she is dependent upon, what she is supported by. In other words, they cannot find a command and control centre. They cannot find an identity headquarters.

So this brings us to what's happening in the citta, in the heart-mind. The essence of the citta is viññāna, awareness itself. And awareness is an elemental quality—it's not a something, but the presence of something. According to the Buddha, this elemental presence, which is awareness, grounds itself on a network of physical and mental qualities, organizes itself around them, and through them constructs an identity. The expression the Buddha uses is that awareness lands, and then it organizes itself and constructs an identity out of different physical and psychological phenomena.

This network consists of a unique sentient body with its characteristics, its possessions, its desires, its aversions, its obsessions, aspirations, and so on. These are the things that animate that sentient body and guide it through life. We call that network of physical and mental qualities the self. And in our own case, we identify with that particular network and we call it "me."

We get a sense of what this might mean when we think of people we know who are entirely predictable. Why are they predictable? Because they're caught in a network of habits, and they do not move beyond the network. Their awareness is grounded on, organized around, clinging to this network of habits, so

they always respond in the same way.

But sometimes we meet people who surprise us, who seem to be quite different, for example, from who they used to be, or who seem capable of responding to life in ways that are not dependent upon the habits of the past. Their awareness also is grounded in and organized around a network of habits and qualities, but noticeably more loosely, so that they do not cling so tightly to their sense of themselves and the nature of the world that they live in. They appear to be much more adaptable to changing circumstances.

And if we take that to the end degree, an awakened one is not grounded anywhere. They do not cling to anything. Their awareness is not supported by, dependent upon, anything at all.

Let's look at another discourse, the Attirāga Sutta—Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.64. Attirāga means "if there is obsession." Here the Buddha is talking about how the normal human condition is one where our citta, the heart-mind, is disturbed by, even defined by, obsession, delight, and craving. Delight here indicates agitation. Technically, delight means, "Oh, this is so great, I've got to do it again!" Have you ever had that kind of experience? "This is fantastic, I've got to have another one." This is delight in the sense that the Buddha uses it.

So awareness lands—the Pāli term is patiṭṭhita—and it organizes itself around these qualities and constructs a self and a world that are characterized by grasping, aversion, and pain. This is the normal human condition.

But in this discourse, the Buddha goes on to talk about the alternative: when our inner state, our citta, is not driven by, not organized around, obsession, delight, and craving. And this is a very famous simile, often quoted. The Buddha is talking to his students and he says, "A roofed building or hall has windows to the north, the south, and the east. When light enters a window at sunrise, where would it land?" So you have the hall, and you've got windows to the north, the south, and the east, but not to the west. The sun rises, the light goes through the east window.

Where would the light land?

Now, the term that he's using for "land" is the same as when he talks about awareness landing and organizing itself. So the monks reply, "On the west wall, Bhante."

"If there was no west wall, where would it land?"

"On earth, Bhante."

"If there was no earth, where would it land?"

"On water, Bhante."

This is ancient Indian cosmology—the great ocean holds the great earth.

"If there was no water, where would it land?"

"It would not land, Bhante. It would not land."

So this is the unlanded awareness.

We have the saying "to see the light." But as we've discussed, we don't actually see light. We see what light illuminates, what light falls upon, what light lands on. That's what we see. But if light did not land anywhere, what could we say about it? Does the light exist? Does the light not exist? Or does concept fail? And if concept fails, what do we have?

This term translated as "unlanded" is *apatiṭṭha*. And we find the same term in its Sanskrit version as a key technical term in the Diamond Sutra. I don't know if you've come across that—if you're into Mahayana Buddhism, you've heard about the Diamond Sutra. It's very big in Zen, for example. And there the term is *apratiṣṭha*.

Let me give a brief quote from the Diamond Sutra, where *apratiṣṭha* is translated here as "unsupported." The Buddha says, "The Bodhisattva Mahasattva"—now, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva is an incredibly advanced practitioner; there's bugger all difference between a Bodhisattva Mahasattva and a Buddha—"the Bodhisattva Mahasattva should give rise to an unsupported heart. A heart not supported anywhere. A heart unsupported by sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, or phenomena." So he goes through the six senses. A bodhisattva mahasattva should give rise to a citta which is not supported anywhere—not supported by any of the six senses.

So this unlanded awareness and the unsupported heart, they're both pointing in the same direction.

Now, this is from the Sanskrit version of the Diamond Sutra. In the Chinese version, which is what is influential in the Zen tradition, we get a much simpler and different translation for this particular passage, where it says, "Dwell nowhere and bring forth that mind." And this is the phrase that sent the Sixth Ancestor, Huineng, off on his quest for awakening. Dwell nowhere and bring forth that mind.

So what can we say about this unlanded awareness, this unsupported heart? It exists, but it cannot be described. An awakened one exists but cannot be captured by concepts. It cannot be captured by anything we think or say about him or her. Because consider how description works. How can I describe X, whatever X is? Whatever I say does not capture X, because whatever I say is not X. It's a network of concepts about X. So no explanation can capture the actual lived experience. The citta of the liberated one exists—there really is liberation—but it cannot be pinned down by concept. And of course, this is true even of mundane concepts. No concept, for example, can pin down the taste of a good cup of coffee.

So this is a concept we find in early Buddhism, we find in the Theravada, but the people who really get to play with it are certain streams of the Mahayana. And here, let's have a look at how the practitioners of the Chan tradition played with this concept of unlanded awareness, or the unsupported heart.

Daowu and Qian Yuan went to a house to make a condolence call after a death in the family—in other words, they were going to the funeral. Now, of these two characters, Daowu is the teacher. Yuan, the student, hit the coffin. Bang! And said, "Alive or dead?" Wu said, "I won't say alive and I won't say dead." Yuan said, "Why won't you say?" Wu said, "I won't say. I won't say."

Halfway back, as they were returning to the monastery, Yuan said, "Tell me right away, teacher." The student had been stewing over this the whole time. "Tell me right away, teacher. If you don't tell me, I'll hit you." Wu said, "You may hit me, but I won't say." Yuan then hit him.

I get the impression that the people who got reborn as Chan monks must have been footy players in a previous life. It's all very macho and blokey—always biffing each other and shouting at each other.

Time goes by. After Daowu died, Yuan went to Xishuang and brought up this story. His teacher had died and Yuan had to find himself another teacher because he hadn't finished his training yet. But this business had been bugging him all this time. Years had gone by and it still bugged him. So he goes to this other teacher, Xishuang, and tells him the whole story.

Shuang said, "I won't say alive, and I won't say dead." Yuan said, "Why won't you say?" Shuang said, "I won't say, I won't say." At these words, Yuan had insight. He got it. After all those years.

Are you enlightened by this? Shall we just move on?

Basically, no description works. "I won't say alive. I won't say dead." These are just concepts. But what's happening is this: this is the world of non-clinging. And how is the world of non-clinging? The world continues to function. There's still seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding. But while we are in a world of experience, we are no longer in a world of named experience. No concept works. No label of the experience convinces us because the label is not the experience. We cannot pin down the experience of not clinging as anything at all.

Later on we can look back and name it as something—"this happened." But we know that the name has already missed the named. We understand in real time the gap between what is actually happening and any name or concept that we place upon it.

Ordinary life goes on. We see, we hear, we think. But we learn to recognise that while our seeing, our hearing, our thinking are real, what we see, hear, and think are not what we think them to be. Our perceptions and our judgments—all of them—of what we are sensing are fundamentally wrong. They may be useful because they get us through the day,

But fundamentally, they are wrong because they miss the felt experience.

In that case, if they're wrong, then what is right? And as soon as we reach out to name something as right or as wrong, what we're doing is clinging to certainty—the certainty that's granted by concept. And in that clinging, we are stuck, and we are in pain.

But when we recognise that our name, our label does not match, that our concept is wrong, then we can relax. We relax into the gap of uncertainty. And this gap stimulates our curiosity. "I don't know—then what is it after all?" We are curious, investigation arises, and we naturally practise what the Buddha calls sati sampajañña, mindfulness and clear understanding.

But when we think we know, we fall back into habit, which means we fall back into habitual clinging. We are asleep. But when we know that we don't know, we stay alert, because we genuinely don't know what this is, or what happens next. So we have what Dōgen Zenji calls beginner's mind. And the beginner's mind is the mind of the mature practitioner.

If you are genuinely agnostic—most people who claim to be agnostic actually have all sorts of beliefs. Genuine agnosticism is quite difficult, to genuinely not know. True agnosticism means you can't say. But you can't say that you don't live. You act. And this is very much what they emphasise in the Chan and Zen tradition—what's important is the action, not what you think you know. There's a beautiful expression about this: the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.

So let's look at another illustration of this, another Zen story, which will be completely obscure, as they always are. This comes from Case 20 of the Book of Serenity: Luohan's Most Intimate.

This dialogue apparently—although there is disagreement about this—occurred after a three-month retreat. Now, in China at the time, the meditation monks and nuns would do two retreats per year, the summer and the winter, and each retreat would last two months. Then in between the retreats, they'd wander off and do other things. This system is still present in Korea.

Recently, we were visiting Korea and staying at a temple down south, in Jirisan, hanging out with some pretty senior meditation monks. They were talking about meditation, and I asked one of them, "What does it take to be qualified to be a meditation teacher in Korea?" He said, "Well, you know, between thirty and thirty-five years seniority as a monk or a nun, and about fifteen years of meditation practice." Now, by fifteen years, he didn't mean that for fifteen years you did some meditation. He meant literally fifteen years—two six-month retreats per annum, adding up to fifteen years' worth. The implication being, if you haven't done that, why would you pretend to be a meditation teacher?

And I thought, oh my God, no wonder they don't have a particularly high opinion of lay Dharma. It's a pretty high standard.

Anyway, so this story takes place at the end of one of these retreats. The teacher is Lohan, and he's saying goodbye to his students one by one as they leave. One of his students is Fa Yen, and Lohan has got his eye on this man. He thinks he's ripe—maybe he just needs a little push.

So Lohan asks Fa Yen, "Why are you leaving?"

Fa Yen said, "I am following the wind, wandering on pilgrimage."

Lohan said, "What does pilgrimage mean for you?"

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

Lohan said, "Not knowing is most intimate."

Fa Yen suddenly attained great awakening.

I'll leave that one with you. Not knowing is most intimate.

Are there any questions? Presumably not—it's all as clear as mud. We're going to talk about that when we get to anatta.

So "clinging"—the word that gets translated as clinging is *upadana*. And *upadana* is appropriation, taking as one's own. *This is mine.* So this Dharma talk is mine. By the way, just in case you're in any doubt about it, this retreat is mine. This is *upadana*, and it results in self. But that's the executive summary. We'll talk more about it later in the retreat.

Question from participant about whether this relates to Dipa Ma's teaching that anger and fear still arise but without identification.

Yes, I think that's the basic territory we're talking about. The citta throws up what the citta throws up, but it doesn't stick. Of course, if you're a mature practitioner, then what the citta throws up—if you've cleared out all the rubbish, as it were—will be quite different from what it used to throw up. But the essential point is, from the point of view of the practice, it doesn't matter what the citta throws up. What matters is: do we grab onto it? Do we claim it as me and mine? Or do we let it go? It's just an event that comes and goes according to conditions.

I'll give you a very minor example. I was one time doing my own retreat, doing walking meditation around dusk, and suddenly the citta threw up an old obsession—I forget what it was. My first response was, "Oh my God, what's that doing here? That hasn't been around for the past twenty years. Have I not progressed beyond this?"

And then the absurdity of the whole situation struck me. It's got nothing to do with me. And it's got nothing to do with progress. When the conditions are such, these things arise. The conditions change, they go. It's not about me, and it's not about progress, and it's not about the lack of progress. When the conditions are there, this arises.

When the conditions change, they cease.

And in fact, it did cease—immediately. Because there was nothing to hold on to. There was nothing supporting it. There was nothing feeding it.

So one could go through all sorts of quite deep disturbances, but as it were, be untouched by it. And just let

it flow through.

Thank you very much.

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