The Freedom and The Fall

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:03:25

I just consented to being recorded. Does this mean that Google and the Pentagon will hear this talk?

No, not necessarily. It might have other things to do, but you're being recorded now for posterity on our YouTube channel, Patrick.

This is very dodgy, very worrying. Anyway, we better begin.

I call the talk "The Freedom and the Fall," although really this comes in at the end, but maybe it might make sense.

Let's review what we did last time. We were talking about self and not-self. The Buddha taught not-self, or *anattā* in Pali, or in Sanskrit, *anātman*. Now, this was a shock at the time because he was trained in the teaching of *ātman*, of self. He would have been trained in the Upanishadic tradition where *ātman* is absolutely central. But then when he started to teach, he taught not-*ātman*, which was quite a radical departure.

When we talk about this *ātman* tradition, to get a sense of the context of what he's talking about, there are two aspects of *ātman* in the tradition of the Upanishads: the metaphysical or transcendent *ātman*, and the psychological *ātman*.

The metaphysical *ātman* is the transcendent One with a capital O—the One who is, or what is, behind all experience, which makes experience itself possible. There is only one *ātman* in this sense.

Then we have the psychological *ātman*. This is the person who is the one who experiences, the one to whom things are happening, the one to whom this experience refers. So we're in a Zoom meeting, there's something going on, but something is happening to someone. This is the *ātman*, the psychological *ātman*, the psychological self. This is the one to whom this experience refers, the owner of the experience, and the agent who makes the decisions. Who was it who decided to come to this talk? Who is it who is deciding to stick around for a while? It's the *ātman*. This is the psychological *ātman*.

Now, this was the aspect of *ātman* that the Buddha was focused on. He didn't have time for the metaphysical *ātman*, but his focus was on the psychological *ātman*. We talked about this by introducing the question: to what extent does it make sense to think, to speak, or to act in terms of—for example—"this is my body" or "these are my decisions"? If it makes sense to speak like that, to think like that, to perceive like that, to act like that, this is *ātman*. This is the manifestation of a relationship to *ātman*.

As we talked about last time, possession is inherent to *ātman*, to self. For the Buddha, possession is based on what he calls *upādāna*. I usually translate it as clinging or attachment—perhaps more accurately, appropriation. *Upādāna* refers to taking as one's own. So *ātman*—for example, "my body"—means I'm taking an experience of physicality and taking it as my own. "These thoughts"—I'm taking these thoughts as my own. This is appropriation, this is *upādāna*.

Appropriation is always tied up with craving, what the Buddha calls *taṇhā*—literally "thirst," but usually translated as craving; it could be translated as grasping. Appropriation, grasping, and craving are intimately entwined with *ātman*. What appropriation does, its function in a sense, is to give us the illusion of control. If I'm convinced that this is mine, at the back of it is the sense of "Well, I'm in charge." Does it make sense to claim to own something that we do not control? No, it doesn't make any sense at all.

So at the center of self—the psychological self, which is the Buddha's main focus—is appropriation and the effort to control one's world. The Buddha would suggest that this causes pain. Don't do it, because his focus is the cessation of *dukkha*, the cessation of pain. He thinks the perception of self is necessarily bound up with pain for these reasons. So what he wants to do is undermine it.

Does that make any sense? Any questions thus far? So far we're just revising what we did last week.

Shall we move on? Let's look at how the Buddha talks about the perception of self. I recently discovered this very interesting sutta, this discourse—the *Yavakalāpī Sutta*, "The Sheaf of Barley." The translation is based on Sujato's translation on Sutta Central, and I've modified it. The Buddha begins with this idea of a sheaf of barley.

He says, "Suppose a sheaf of barley was placed at a crossroads. Then six people come with flails and start threshing this sheaf of barley, so it is thoroughly threshed by those six flails."

Now, a flail is a stick with a hard piece of wood attached, and threshing is the process of bashing the harvest to separate out the seed from everything else. It's a bashing process that brings out what you're looking for—the seed—by separating things out.

"And then a seventh person comes..." But wait—why six people? Why not five? Why not twelve?

Six senses. Exactly. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. These are bashing away, thrashing away at the sheaf of barley. So at this point, things are pretty bad for the barley.

But then the Buddha says, "And then a seventh person comes with a flail and gives the sheaf of barley a seventh threshing. That sheaf of barley is even more thoroughly threshed." By the way, in English the verb "to thresh" originates from the same word as "to thrash." So the seventh one—this is getting pretty extreme. What is going on here?

The Buddha explains: "In the same way, an ordinary untrained person"—this is the average person—"is struck in the eye by both pleasant and unpleasant sights. They're struck in the ear, in the nose, in the

tongue, in the body, in the mind, by both pleasant and unpleasant phenomena."

So we're being bombarded all the time by sense data, which we recognize as "Oh, I like this" or "Oh, I don't like that." This is the threshing. That's the six threshings.

And then the Buddha adds: "If that ordinary untrained person is committed to future continued existence, that foolish person is even more thoroughly struck, like that sheaf of barley threshed by the seventh person."

Now, "committed to future continued existence"—this is usually translated in terms of rebirth, like "One day I'll die, but then I'll be reborn." But when you look at what the Buddha is actually saying, he doesn't say that. He says basically "continued becoming in the future." He doesn't say it's beyond one life. He just says the future.

So my situation as an ordinary person is already pretty bad—I'm being bombarded all the time by these six flails. But I add an extra one if I have a preoccupation with continued existence in the future. In other words, if I want to project this into the future. And it's pretty obvious that at this point we're talking about self.

Let me inquire: do any of you have any sense of projecting your experience into the future? Does anybody anticipate waking up tomorrow morning and continuing their business tomorrow that they began today? And what makes it possible for that to make any sense? It's the sense of self. This is what the Buddha is getting at. He doesn't mention the sense of self explicitly, but this is what he's talking about.

And it's linked to our determination to remain the same over time—the sense that the one who is experiencing this right now will be the same as the one who will experience something else later. Survival over time is a basic indicator of an identity, an ātman in the psychological sense. This is what the Buddha is getting at in this discourse.

Then he goes on to tell a story.

Once upon a time, a battle was fought between the gods and the demons. Vepacitti, lord of demons, addressed the demons. (The "demon" here translates asura—they're the anti-gods, as it were. The suras and the asuras, the gods and the anti-gods. These words come via Sanskrit from Iran, but in Iran it's the opposite: the asura is the god and the sura is the demon. But we have this sense of devas, beings of light and harmony, and then their opposite—the demons.)

So the lord of the demons, Vepacitti, addresses the demons: "If the demons defeat the gods in this battle, bind Sakka, lord of gods, by his limbs and neck and bring him to my presence in the city of demons."

Meanwhile, Sakka, lord of gods, addressed the gods of the Thirty-Three: "If the gods defeat the demons in this battle, bind Vepacitti by his limbs and neck and bring him to my presence in Sudhamma, hall of the gods."

If you're getting a sense of two football teams lining up against each other, I think you're getting the feel for what's going on here.

Now, in that battle, the gods won and the demons lost. So the gods of the 33 bound Vepacitti by his limbs and neck and brought him into Sakka's presence in Sudhamma, hall of the gods. So far, all is happening according to Vedic tribal culture—constant warfare, humiliation for the defeated.

And there Vepacitti remained, bound by his limbs and neck. That is, until it seemed to him that it's the gods who are principled while the demons are unprincipled. "Now I belong here in the city of the gods." Then he found himself liberated from the bonds on his limbs and neck. He entertained himself, supplied and provided with the five kinds of heavenly sensual stimulation.

By the way, those of you who are inclined towards belief in rebirth and thinking of heading off to heaven—the Indian Buddhist heavens are much more interesting than the Christian heaven. In the Christian heaven, first of all, there's only one of them, which is a bit crowded. And apparently people don't do much; they hang about in white sheets and sing hymns. But if you go to one of these Indian Buddhist heavens, you are endowed with the five heavenly sensual pleasures, stimulations. So it's basically party time.

So Vepacitti changes his mind about the situation and suddenly he's liberated and having a good time. But when it seemed to him that the demons are principled and the gods unprincipled—"Now I will go over there to the city of the demons"—he found himself bound by his limbs and neck and the five kinds of heavenly sensual stimulation disappeared.

That's how subtly Vepacitti was bound. You get a sense that the devas, the gods, are very subtle in the way they imprison people. No crude dungeons here. But the sutta adds that the bonds of Mara are even more subtle than that.

Now, Mara is a functional equivalent of the devil. But unlike the devil, he's not demonic in the sense that he's not lord of a hell realm. He's actually lord of a heaven realm. He's a deva, a god. But he's a god with a rather bizarre obsession: he likes to keep track of beings whom he regards as underneath him, which includes us. He tracks people through their bodies, but above all through their citta, their hearts and minds.

The problem is that it's very difficult for him to get a hold on practitioners, and it's impossible for him to get a hold on an awakened one. So he's constantly frustrated by this practice and enlightenment business, constantly trying to persuade practitioners not to be practitioners. And if you look at the suttas where Mara turns up as the tempter, his voice is the voice of good common sense. It's like, "Why on earth are you doing this to yourself? Why don't you go home, live a comfortable life? Look, if you want to support Buddhism, that's great—give lots of dana to all these monks and meditators, and it'll be wonderful for you. Why are you putting yourself through that?" So he's a very subtle tempter.

Mara refers to death—death and limitation. Death here being what happens when we don't do the practice, don't attain some measure of awakening. The Buddha says, "But the bonds of Mara are even more subtle than that. When we conceptualize, we are bound by Mara. When we do not conceptualize, we are free from the wicked one."

Conceptualizing is the verb *mañ*ñ*ati*, the noun *mañ*ñ*ana*. It's a technical term. *Man* refers to mind, and it's translated in different ways. Some people translate it as "thinking," but I think that's pretty inadequate here. Let's have a look at what the Buddha's getting at.

First of all, the Buddha's not talking about *ātman*. He's not talking about self. But it seems pretty obvious that the bonds of Mara are the bonds of ātman. The message is that when perception changes, everything changes. When our minds change, our lives change.

I think we've all experienced this. Meditators will recognize it—like if you've ever done a meditation retreat and one day you step out of the hall and look around, and you realize...

What's going on? The sun is sunny and the tree's a tree and the breeze is breezy and there's no problem. I'm sure I had a problem, but I can't remember what it is. It's just a shift in perception. Or sometimes you might have an argument with someone and then at some point there's a kind of click, a shift in perception. Oh, there's no conflict anymore.

So when the Buddha's talking about self, he's talking about something that binds us, something that causes dukkha. But at the same time, it's something created by the activity of the mind, which is inherently unstable—and it can go click and shift in a moment.

Then the Buddha talks about the forms of conceptualizing. These are forms of conceptualizing: "I am" is a conceptualization. "I am this." "I will be." "I will not be." And so on. He can recognize these are the movements of self. Conceptualizing is a disease, a boil, a dart—in other words, it's painful. So you should train yourselves like this: "We will live with a heart that does not conceptualize."

Basically what he's saying is that what we think is going on—our perceptions, the way we see the world—perceptions are based on concepts and the drives that fuel concepts. These are piled on top of the actual experience. We have the actual experience of the six senses, the six sensitivities. Now, these are difficult enough, and then we pile something on top—this is the seventh threshing. When we do that, we separate ourselves from the felt actuality of this present experience. We catapult out of it into a world created by mind and the drivenness that mind feels and expresses. So we create a world characterized by separation and by pain. And this is the self project. This is the project of creating atman, the self.

So what to do? Now we're going to talk about practicing not-self. Any questions thus far?

So how does this work out in terms of practice? The context I'm speaking of here is the Mahasi lineage of mindfulness meditation or insight meditation, which is all about cultivating ñāṇa. Ñāṇa means

understanding—developing a different understanding of our experience. We're going to go briefly through this process, but see how it culminates in the perception of not-self.

If we're meditating, what happens is we're given a meditation object. This is the standard thing. "Okay, I want you to sit here for half an hour. Try not to move and just focus on your breathing." Or "Just do a body scan," like in MBSR. Those are the two basic ones. Probably breathing is the most common meditation object.

So let's say it's breathing. "Okay, I want you to sit here for half an hour and just focus on the breathing. Now, when you find yourself thinking blah, blah, blah, blah, just drop it. Go back to the breathing. And when you think, 'Oh my God, my leg hurts, I can't do this anymore,' just drop it. Go back to the breathing." You probably recognize this is a pretty basic meditation method.

Now, what are we doing if we do this? Well, basically what we're doing is getting in touch with the elemental qualities of experience, in particular via the body. We're training ourselves to directly aware the specifics of this experience right now. In the Mahasi lineage, the verb they use to directly aware is "to note." But essentially, it's to aware, and it's active. It's like, "What's this? Be aware of this." And we usually begin with body—let's say breathing.

So what have I got? I've got this in-breath. Then what happens? Oh, I've got this out-breath. What happens after that? Ah, this in-breath. Ah, that's right, this out-breath. And so on.

Now, at some point we're distracted. In the Mahasi approach, when we realize we're distracted, we directly aware the distraction. Oh, I'm thinking—okay, got it. Come back to the breath. Oh, it's painful. So what's the actual sensation? Oh, it's sharp and hard—okay, got it. Now come back to the breath.

What we're doing is we're trying to stay at the ground level of experience, and in particular physical experience. Now, theoretically it doesn't have to be physical experience, but it's much easier when we're working with the body, so most people do. And as we do this, our clarity of engagement with the immediacy of physical experience develops. As that develops, we start to forget our habitual perceptions and responses. Mindfulness grows. We get a clearer sense of what's going on right now, and our habitual reactions and perceptions start to fade into the background.

Now, where do we find ātman, self? We find it most obviously in these habitual reactions and perceptions. That's where it's obvious to us.

The way the Buddha, particularly the way classical Theravāda picks up this and talks about this process—classical Theravāda describes it in terms of the activity of knowing or awareing. So I'm awareing, I'm directly awareing in-breath, out-breath. And the flip side: that which is known or awared. So if I'm being aware of the breathing, then I've got two things happening. One is the awareness, and the other is the breathing.

When we work with the body, we get to know the qualities of physical experience—what the Buddha calls the elements. It's hardness and softness. Can anybody feel hardness in the body right now? Anybody feel softness? It's lightness and heaviness. It's movement and stillness, and so on. We're getting to know the elemental qualities of the body as they manifest in the present.

And we're also getting to know the qualities of awareing itself, experiencing itself. For example, we become familiar with awareness—what the Buddha calls vijñāna. We see how awareness moves towards its object; this is manasikāra, attention. We see the flavor of experience—sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes it's painful, sometimes nothing much; this is vedanā, feeling. We see how we recognize an experience as something familiar or unfamiliar. So I know what this is—this is the in-breath. Now something's happening. What is this exactly? Not sure. Oh, that's what it is. This is saññā, perception.

These are psychological activities. We're getting to see physical elemental qualities and the elemental qualities of the process of experiencing itself. And when we do that, when we're keeping with the felt actuality of experiencing, there's no room for our habitual perceptions to arise. They're just pushed out of the way. For as long as our mindfulness is unbroken, we are not conceptualizing worlds and getting lost in them.

So these habitual perceptions are held at bay by mindfulness. You can feel when you're doing this—there's an effort involved. You've got to stay with the experience. No, no, don't get caught up. Stay with the in-breath.

What is happening is we are being introduced to a new way of viewing the world, a way that we weren't particularly familiar with. Some people are familiar with it—for example, I think people who play sports are familiar with this, and that's one of the reasons why people like sports.

Now, this new way of viewing the world is very shaky, because as soon as we relax our effort, as soon as we forget our mindfulness—bang, habit kicks in and the self is back. So we've got to start again. It's very shaky. But something new is being introduced, and the longer the practice continues, the stronger and more familiar this new perception becomes. This, for the classical Theravāda, is the beginning of insight.

Any questions? Okay.

We're studying the flow of experience—material, mental, physical, psychological. And we're getting to see that experience is a whole series of phenomena, of events that come and go. An in-breath begins, it dances, and it ends. Then a thought begins, dances, and ends. A physical sensation begins, dances, and then ends. These are events, phenomena coming and going.

We begin to recognize that they come and go according to certain patterns. They come and go according to conditions. So we begin to see what the Buddha calls *paṭicca samuppāda*, dependent arising. And we see it in different ways.

For example, we see that mind conditions body. Without awareness, there's no physical experience. For there to be an experience of my breathing, there has to be the awareness of it. Has anybody ever had the experience where they forget that they're breathing? You figure you must have been breathing because you're alive, but you haven't actually noticed it for the past five minutes, or thirty minutes. Have you ever had that kind of experience? So we have a physical process going on—breathing—but we don't have the awareness of it, which means the experience of breathing drops away. Mind conditions body. You've got to have awareness to have an experience.

Another example, which the Mahasi teachers—the Burmese teachers—really emphasize when they teach this practice, is intention, choice, decision. Without an intention to move, there can be no movement. I'm waving my hand about to emphasize various points. There has to be an intention, a decision, for me to move my hand—which is mind. And if there isn't, there's no movement. Mind conditions body.

But equally, body conditions mind. If there was no visual object to see, there'd be no awareness of the visual object. Or if I see something, that seeing, that physical experience, conditions a whole series of thoughts and responses. "Well, that's nice. I like that. How long has that been here? I haven't noticed that before. Who does that belong to?" Body conditions mind. Mind conditions body.

When painful thoughts arise, the body reacts by stressing, by patterns of tension. When pleasant thoughts arise, the body relaxes. Mind conditions body.

Mind conditions mind. I'm meditating and there's an initial distracting thought that pops up in the mind. Then mind seizes upon this and creates a storyline. Mind is conditioning mind.

And body conditions body. What appears to be one movement of the body, when we see it in detail, we see is actually a whole series of movements, and each movement conditions the next.

So we're starting to see not simply physical and psychological phenomena, but we're starting to see the connections between them. In the roughest sense, we're seeing the connections between body and mind, mind and body, body and body, mind and mind. And as we do this, we are also cultivating the perception of impermanence, because when we actually start to track phenomena coming and going, what we're seeing is change.

The perception of impermanence is central to opening up insight. Remember, we talked about how self is characterized by this sense of a projection into the future, sameness through time. The opposite perception is impermanence, is change. It isn't the same through time. And this becomes clear to meditators as they practice. The practice doesn't stay the same. It changes. And if you're practicing for insight, for *ñāṇa*, for understanding, you start to get interested in this.

You start to notice that as attention becomes sharp, you might see in particular the moment that an experience begins, although you might not notice when it ends. A very common experience—people will say, "My attention is drawn to experience A, and then I'm examining this, and my attention is then drawn

to something else, to experience B." Now A hasn't stopped; it's just that I go from here—bang—to there, or something else is happening. And then I realize, "Oh no, there's something else happening," so I go from B to C.

And so on. I'm seeing the beginning of an experience. Oh, what's that? I'm seeing something of the middle. Oh yes, that's what it's doing. But I'm not noticing the end. Rather, I'm saying, oh, something else has just begun. And this characterizes this very early level of insight into change, into impermanence.

Along with this, there can begin an inferential understanding. So far, there's been no conceptualization. But then there's room for a kind of conceptualization, though it's a different kind of conceptualization. It's an inference, because what we're doing is looking at the structure of experience. And then it begins to dawn on us that actually, if this is the way experience is structured, well, it's always like this. These processes that I'm seeing now, they must have been happening in the past. And surely they're going to happen in the future.

With this, the perception of the permanence of the self is being challenged. The self is under some slight degree of challenge. On the one hand, it's being held back because I'm so focused on just tracking the actual experience. But on the other hand, because what I'm seeing is the constant change of experience, then the assumption of the stability, the permanence of self is beginning to be challenged. It might be very slight. Some people get a clear sense of this. Some people really get it very early. Other people don't. It varies hugely.

One of my teachers in Burma, Sayadaw Ujanaka, liked to tell us a story about when he went to the US and ran a retreat. This was in the South, a very conservative part of the country. There was one man who had an experience of—let me see if I can remember exactly what it was—essentially that there's just the in-breath and the out-breath and the knowing of it. Basically that's what there is. But it hit him so hard. He had spent his life as a devout Christian. And at that point, he abandoned Christianity. Bang, forever. Came to Sayadaw Ujanaka—he was a Buddhist. No more Christianity. Went off to Burma, did intensive practice. And that's all it took. Just: wait a minute, what's going on here? There's the breath coming and going. And there's the awareness of the breath. That's all there is. Bang. He had this profound entry into not-self.

Now, that's very unusual. For most people, they wouldn't notice anything like that degree. But you can see that something is beginning to happen. There's a subversion going on, even if the meditator is completely unaware of it. It's happening.

So the practice develops, and the perception of impermanence also develops. Attention becomes sharper, more subtle. The practitioner is seeing more of the change process, seeing the beginning, the middle, and the end of the experiences that are happening. Seeing the complete process of something arising, manifesting, ceasing. Arise, manifest, cease. And this starts to open up the perceptions of dukkha and anatta, of pain and not-self.

Again, the degree, the extent to which these perceptions become noticeable depends hugely on the individual. For some people, they become obvious, but for others, they don't. For example, some practitioners at this point will feel very painful sensations in the body—not the usual aches and pains you get when you begin to meditate. They've gotten over that. The practice is developing, and suddenly there are acutely unpleasant painful sensations arising with no apparent physical reason for them. Some people have disturbing images come up in their meditations, disturbing thoughts or images. Some people become extremely irritable for no apparent reason. And all of these are indications that the perception of dukkha, of pain, is starting to be aroused.

But others just sail right through this and nothing much happens. There are enormous individual differences.

Then the perception of impermanence continues to mature, and change starts to be seen as moving faster and faster. Again, the complete cycle becomes very clear—arising, manifestation, cessation—with body and mind both affected. The body and mind both seem very light. Posture becomes easy. Pain usually disappears at this point. The mind is very clear. Faith gets very strong—confidence in the practice, in the dharma. If a person is a Buddhist, then faith in Buddhism will become really strong at this point. If a person is not a Buddhist, faith can arise in other ways, like you're meditating away and you think, "Wow, this is really, really good. I've got to tell my friends about this." This is faith arising, confidence.

And everything at this stage is a sweet spot. People enjoy this one. It's known as udayabbaya ñāṇa, the understanding of arising and cessation, things coming and going. People have a good time at this point. Some people think they're enlightened when it's really strong. And then they discover their error, because then there's a turn. And this is bound up with the nature of impermanence.

When we say that things are impermanent, we say that they begin, they endure, and then they end. And what view of impermanence we have changes depending on what perspective our minds take as our attention and awareness shifts. Remember Vepacitti—he changed his mind about his situation, bang, "Oh, it's great." And then he changed his mind again, "Oh, I'm caught." When the Buddha was talking about the way insight develops, he was talking about how subtle it is, that a perception can just go click and everything is different. This is one of the reasons why you can't depend on a particular set of experiences always happening when you meditate. Because the more we do the practice, the more the perspective our minds are taking on experience is changing. And with that, everything changes.

Now here, when our perception of impermanence matures, what the mind focuses on, what the mind notices predominantly, is the ending of things, the disappearance of things. We talked about this in a previous talk about dukkha. Here is where the perception of dukkha starts to become predominant. And you get different people who report different things. Sometimes people will say that they feel like they're on the edge of a bottomless abyss, on the edge of a cliff. Or they're falling into it. Or they have a sense of the groundlessness of experience. It's just coming and going, and what's really there? What's underneath

all this? Nothing. What lies beneath? Nothing.

This can open up into an existential anxiety or even a dread, depending on whether it's strong or relatively weak. It could be just an anxious feeling coming up. If we're familiar with anxiety, it might be a very familiar anxiety—"Oh yeah, I recognize this." Or it might be a lot stronger. But what's happening deep in the citta, in the heart, is this sense of: well, if all there is, is changing mental and physical phenomena, what's underneath? And if there isn't anything, what happens to me? And what's all this about?

At this point, it might be a weak aspect. This understanding can take the form of the meditator apparently losing their ability to focus on anything. So suddenly, the practice that was going well—samādhi, concentration, faith, confidence, lightness, and so on and so forth—and then suddenly I can't do it anymore. I try to focus on something, and the attention just slides off. It's like trying to hold something, and as soon as you try to grasp it, it slips out of your hand. This is one form in which this perception of the cessation of things can manifest.

In a stronger form, it can be like falling into a black hole. Wherever you look, there's only blackness. Again, there's a whole range of possibilities of actual symptoms, but what will emerge is some kind of fear or anxiety. In a strong form, this can manifest as panic. In a weak form, it can be just a sense of existential unease, a sense of nothing going right, of generalized anxiety. There might be a felt sense that I'm not in control of my life. And you can see the connection with the psychological ātma. It's the self that's the controller. So with this sense of dukkha, the sense of self is being challenged.

So what we've got is this: with the understanding of change, an understanding of dukkha develops. And with the understanding of change and dukkha, an understanding of not-self develops. But it can be like an underground stream that we tend not to notice, partly because it's very subtle. Not-self is an absence. Change is something definite. Pain, unsatisfactoriness—these are something definite. But not-self isn't something definite. It's an absence. So it's much more subtle, and it can be much harder to actually get a sense of, "Oh, that's what's going on." In fact, one might at some point realize, "Oh, I've been experiencing not-self for some time now. I just didn't notice it." That can easily happen.

So this felt sense of the absence of control is painful, but it's also an indicator of not-self. It becomes clear that things come and go according to conditions that are not under anyone's control. They're certainly not under my control. They just move according to nature. This sense of being in the hands of nature grows stronger. Some people find this comforting and can relax in it. Other people find it threatening. Again, the response varies from person to person and time to time.

Another way in which the understanding of not-self emerges in the perception of pain is through the very strange realization that this anxiety that I have, this fear, is real, but it's not personal. When I'm mindful, I realize that there's something wrong here, but there's no one who is suffering wrongness. There's danger here, but there's no one who is in danger. It's like watching a scary movie. Fear arises, but even as the fear

is present, there's also the understanding that the situation is not real. And so fundamentally, the fear is not grounded. There's no need to fear the fear.

This sense of groundlessness—we enter into the perception of pain, of dukkha, through recognizing groundlessness through change. And it's painful. But not-self emerges here in our perception that this groundlessness is itself groundless. Our fear is equally groundless.

Here we're beginning to get a sense of the freedom and the fall. Some people say that they have an experience like free fall—it's like they're falling into something, falling into the abyss. But if I'm falling into something, what exactly is the problem? Well, the problem is I fall and at some point, splat. And that's why I'm fearful. But what if we recognize there's no ground? There's nowhere to go splat. When the citta at a deep level—and this is deeper than thinking about it—when the citta starts to recognize that, then the fall, the free fall, the fall drops away, and what we've got is the free.

This is how we move through impermanence and dukkha into not-self.

As the practice matures, what's happening in the mind, in the heart, through this practice over time is that mindfulness is getting stronger and stronger and more continuous. And along with that, equanimity develops. Equanimity is essentially balance. The mind becomes very strong, very clear, very sharp, and very balanced. When the balance sets in, all forms of pain fade away. Sometimes they just disappear—bang, they're gone. Sometimes they just fade. Or sometimes there's just a sense of them being very minimal, just in the background. There's very little or no sense of mental disturbance.

The other thing about this stage—and here not-self is becoming predominant—is that you get a sense of the meditation carrying on by itself. There's very little or no conscious effort on the meditator's part. She finds that she can sit and walk, meditate for long periods of time. Some people find they don't need much sleep at this stage.

Also, the practice really settles in the sense that it becomes very normal, very unspectacular. The attention just rests naturally on a few experiences and stays there for a period of time. We might have been having quite interesting experiences of impermanence and dukkha and this and that, but at this point we're just coming back to in-breath, out-breath, in-breath. It's just happening by itself, and it's quite interesting, and nothing else needs to happen, really.

So these are all indicators of equanimity, and equanimity is an indicator that the mind is perceiving not-self. Things can get very interesting at this point. The meditator may feel that they understand the practice as if for the first time. It's like, "I never realized it was this simple." And this attitude of clarity and simplicity carries over into everything else. Life itself becomes much more simple, and things become much clearer and more obvious. We start to wonder, how on earth did I ever get myself tangled up in these enormous problems which exist only in my mind?

So at this point, everything is fundamentally okay. When you hear the dharma rhetoric of "I'm okay,

you're okay," and so on, this is actually what they're talking about—the experience of equanimity. And the experience of equanimity is the indicator of the perception of not-self.

At this stage in the practice, the meditator is very difficult to upset. Remember how we talked about how sometimes you might be meditating and become very sensitive and very irritable? If you go to a residential retreat, there are all these rules about correct behavior, and it's basically about not disturbing the meditators because they're really sensitive. But at this point, you're not really sensitive. It's like, "Oh yeah, him. This is the guy who just cannot figure out how to close the door quietly and how to walk quietly across the meditation hall. That's interesting. In-breath, out-breath. What to do? Equanimity." And it's there because of the perception of not-self.

You notice that the perception of not-self isn't necessarily anything spectacular. It's just like, "Oh, that's odd. This guy doesn't irritate me anymore." That might be all it is. It's because it's part of nature—it's not the big revelation of Buddha speaks. There can be strong experiences, but equanimity can be very, very normal.

If you find yourself in this stage, you have to be careful about effort because it's very easy to stop making effort when everything's cruising along on its own. The later Theravada tradition, looking at equanimity and analyzing it, asked the question: what's the near enemy of equanimity? In other words, what can trip it up? And the answer is indifference.

So the irritating meditator bangs the door and stomps through the meditation hall. In a state of equanimity, you're fully aware of this, but it's okay. But equally, it might be okay because you've become indifferent. "I don't care." Indifference is not equanimity. For a start, indifference is a dull state of mind. Equanimity is very clear and sharp. But if I get into cruise mode, and if I drop the commitment—the path factor of right effort—then the whole thing starts to crumble. I don't notice it crumbling, and the equanimity actually segues into indifference. By the time I realize that I've stuffed it up, I've already crashed and burned. I've got to start all over again, which is really frustrating.

So at this point, you've really got to be careful about the quality of effort—not too much, that'll kill it, that'll smother it, but not too little either.

This is where not-self opens up. We're in free fall, but we realize there's nothing to fall onto. Because if there's no ground, there's nothing to fall against, and so nothing to fear. Free fall becomes free. And this is the freedom of not-self.

Now the doctrine of Ātman—both the metaphysical Ātman and the psychological Ātman—is all about giving a foundation for us and our world. We construct a self because we need a ground. We need something to refer to, to measure against.

But when we go through the terror of groundlessness and emerge on the other side, we finally recognize that not only can we not find a ground—there isn't one. And in fact, we don't need one. The universe itself

provides the ground. I don't need to do it. It's already happening.

This is where insight meditation, or mindfulness meditation, is designed to bring us—to this point, to stay with this perception as long as possible. And this matures the citta, like the awakening factors mature naturally. There's a kind of ripening process, and at some point the penny drops and we realize nibbāna itself. The view of self, the view of "I am," "I am this," drops away. And it never returns in quite the same way. We cannot have the same relationship to experience again.

This is what the early tradition calls the first stage of awakening, that of the Dhammacakku—the vision of Dhamma. You notice that it's a very cognitive expression. It's like, "Oh, this is what's going on."

Now, of course we will forget our vision. Times will come, things will happen, and we forget. The view of self and the clinging to self flood back. They come because they're deeply, deeply ingrained. But it will be a different relationship. It will be fundamentally weakened compared to what it was before. And once we recognize that we're caught up in it and we're aware of it, it can't survive the awareness. It starts to fade.

So our baseline has changed. We have the normal rhythms of life that we've always had, but the baseline, instead of being here, is up here. This is the point where we enter into the noble eightfold path, as opposed to the eightfold path. This is where the path actually begins. It begins with this vision of Dhamma. Then we're in the path.

Another expression used is that we are in the stream—we have entered the stream. There's a momentum in the practice which is taking us to full awakening. And the Buddha says, look, it may take seven existences. Now, this is usually translated or interpreted as seven human lifetimes, or lifetimes as a deva, or whatever. But he doesn't say that. He says existences. So how long is an existence? Well, another way of asking this question is: how long is a ball of string? If there's no one who exists, then how long is an existence? It doesn't really tell you much about time.

But the seven is important because numbers in an oral tradition, like what the Buddha worked in, have symbolic importance. The number seven seems to indicate a natural cycle. So natural cycles of life will keep rolling on, but they're limited now.

One image—I don't know where it comes from, but I think it's in the later tradition—is that life after life in saṃsāra is like an ocean, a vast ocean, and we're stuck in it. When we have the vision of Dhamma, boom, the ocean is gone. All there is is a puddle. Of course, if the ocean is infinite, it can be a pretty big puddle. But you get the sense that something has changed, and we're not going back to what it was before. We can't. We're on the way.

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