

Buddhist Meditation: Stream Entry (7 of 7)

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So probably this will be the last talk in the series that I began many weeks ago, and it began with a simple description of what mindfulness is. In the Zen tradition, they have an expression called a single enlightenment, or sometimes a simple enlightenment. And that is a kind of a wonderful experience of being very much in the present moment, and really appreciating the present, being very present for the present moment, and kind of intense. Enlightened can awaken to the present moment. But it's called a single enlightenment or simple enlightenment because enlightenment is much more than a childlike just being present for this moment in its pristine glory. Because enlightenment or liberation is more than a kind of presence we bring to this moment here.

It's possible to lose yourself in this moment of the very present here. And its kind of simplicity. It's kind of deductionistic, because we're much more than just the ability to be present here and now. We have the ability to think about the past. We have the ability to think about the future. And so liberation is more than a presence we bring, though the presence we bring to our life is the foundation for liberation.

And liberation involves a transformation and a transformation of us. And so today I want to talk some more about liberation, which was a topic from last week. And as I was thinking about this topic for today, I was reflecting a little bit on how many religions focus on an unseen world, and sometimes very explicitly, where the unseen world is the big part of what the religious faith is about: unseen world of God, or gods, and heavens, and hells, and many different things. And as with many religions, Buddhism also puts an emphasis on an unseen world. And with the same sense, there is more to this life than what we normally experience it. And many people kind of, at some point, realize there has to be more.

There has to be more than now. For some people, not endlessly going to their job is not something. It brings them a tremendous amount of meaning. There has to be more, or certain kind

of pursuits, or some kind of way of living. There has to be more than this. There has to be this life in living.

Maybe it's OK, or maybe it's not OK. Maybe there's a lot of suffering a part of it, a lot of difficulty, a lot of challenges, a lot of poverty, and so be. It feels there must be more, not something else that's possible. And so Buddhism points to this something else that's possible, something which we can call, we could perhaps call the unseen world, but unseen not because it's not seeable, but rather it's unseen because we haven't yet seen it. And it's also unseen because it doesn't belong to what we can see with our eyes. It's not to do with, you know, the external world, the empirical world.

But rather, it's something we see with an inner eye, something we see with what sometimes is called the Dharma eye, or the Buddha eye, or the wisdom eye. So rather, in something that's unseen, because it's by nature unseeable. Buddhism focuses on what we normally don't see as we go about our life, but is seeable, but is seeable with the inner eye. And, oh, when the Buddha talked about the Dharma and talked about *nibbāna*, a synonym for liberation, he emphasized that it was something you can see here and now, can be seen directly. It's to be seen directly. But normally people don't see the Dharma.

Normally people don't see. People don't see *nibbāna*. And when he tried to explain or describe how *nibbāna* can be seen, that should be interesting, right? How do you see liberation, freedom, awakening? How do you see it? How can it be directly visible for you right here and now?

And what he said is that you see liberation by the absence of greed, hate, and delusion, that we have the capacity to notice the presence of greed, hate, delusion, and also have the capacity of seeing the suffering that follows in the wake of our greed and our hate and our delusion. And it's possible to see the absence of greed, hate, and delusion, and it's possible to see the sense of freedom or peace that might come with a proper liberation from greed, hate, and delusion. And in seeing that, in seeing the absence or the liberation of greed, hate, and delusion, then we've seen liberation. We've seen *nibbāna*. The absence of greed and delusion is not visible if, you know, if you're caught, if you're blinded by greed, hate, and delusion. If you're greedy and blinded by desire and attachments and fear, then it can't be seen.

But when that is dropped away, then only the inner eye can see that directly. So there are two streams or currents in the currents, in the flow of life, in life stream of a human being. And one stream is a stream that in Buddhist practice, we're meant to go up against, go upstream from the stream, up currents, flowing up current. And that's the current of greed, hate, and delusion, the ways in which attachments and clinging, addictions, compulsions, fears kind

of drive our lives, motivate our life. That is something we have somehow overcome. And that describing Buddhism is going upstream.

It's called going upstream or up current. From many of the popular currents of what we can see in our society, much of society seems very easy to see. There's a lot of greed, hate, and delusion that's kind of rampant. That's one stream, one current. The other current is a current of the Dharma. And someone who has tasted the first taste of liberation is said to have entered the stream or enter the current, but not the current of greed, hate, and delusion, but the current that leads to full liberation.

And so these two currents that going on, one we have to kind of work against, and the other that we have to get ourselves into and then be carried down along it. And so there comes a point that we start crossing from one current to the other. If all your life is about is greed, delusion, or attachment, then it's work to practice. So if your mind is, sit down, meditate, and your thinking mind is addictive, then it's a certain degree. It's work to let go. It's work to relax.

It's work to kind of overcome, be stronger than the compulsive mind. But at some point, the force of the compulsive mind quiets down enough. Or at some point, we switch gears, switch tracks in the mind, and we enter the stream where it becomes more like a gravitational pull or stream that's carrying us towards a sense of peace, a sense of freedom, a sense of spaciousness, of transparency. And when you enter the stream of the Dharma, then you can feel that there's, like, a pull towards goodness, is a pull towards something really wonderful. And it's a magic. It's almost magic, but it's a really special moment or a special thing to be able to see or feel a move from one gravitational force to another, from one current to the other.

And for some people who practice, at some point they get kind of right at a juncture between these two streams, and they might want to sway back and forth. They get caught a little bit in the stream of greed, hate, and delusion. But they're able to pull themselves out of that and find themselves in a different stream. And then you can, they can feel the pull, or feel that wonderful kind of floating that goes on that blows you down towards a greater sense of freedom. But maybe, you know, but it's not stable, and at some point near the wind blows you over a little bit back over to the other stream, a great delusion. And you get caught there, and it might take, you know, a few hours or days or months to realize, I'll wait a minute. I've been caught up in that stream.

Let's get back to the one I prefer. Go back to learn of freedom. But it's a great thing. At some point to feel that there's this force or this momentum or this clear sense of possibility or this

towards a level of peace or freedom that's almost like beckoning us, calling us, Come here, or kind of pulling us, like that's where we want to go. It's not like you have to reason with yourself, or I'd like to be free. It's not that you have to want to be free because you try to get away from something that's painful.

But freedom is almost like something which is kind of like pulling us or inviting us or to itself. As the Chinese tradition said, one famous Chinese teacher, he said, Awakening beckons us in everything. That is a beautiful thing to everything. And everything you find upon a beckoning to come here, come here, and be free. And what is it to find the freedom in everything you encounter?

So another kind of way of talking about these two streams, perhaps, is that you think of going up a mountain and down a mountain. If you go up them, you go out to go up to the top of the mountain to be able to go down. But going up the mountain is hard work, and once you get to the top, then it's relatively easy to go down. Your kind of gravity is in your favor. So at some point, with liberation, with practice, the gravity is in our favor. And one clear marking of this juncture is called stream entry, entering the stream.

When you enter the stream, some things, it's a remarkable moment, a remarkable experience, because you'll never quite be the same again after that, even though you might still be sliding back and forth. But once you really have a taste of being a stream, getting really wet in one stream, even if you slide back to the other currents, you know you've been changed by that experience, and it becomes easier and easier to slide back into the current again. Then when you current of peace or freedom, when a person has entered the stream, the stream of the Dharma, the stream of liberation, it's said that they've been changed in three ways. And this is a very important idea of change, because many people, when they think about *nibbāna* or freedom, they think that it's an experience, and it's an experience that must be. No, really have an experience. You're supposed to have this experience, and then you've been verified, Oh, I had this perfect experience, and therefore I can have a badge.

And you know, you know, I've been to Disneyland and the value of *nibbāna*. The value of liberation is not in having the experience, but rather the value is in how the experience has changed us. It's how it's transformed us. So in that sense, it's not so important to know exactly what *nibbāna* is. It's a little bit difficult to describe exactly what the experience of liberation is in its kind of profundity in its deepest sense. But it's not so important to know what it is even how you can experience it as it is, to allow it to change us, to be changed by it.

So stream entry involves three different changes. And the first one is usually listed three,

then there are other ones are also often listed. The first change is once you have entered the stream, there is a sense, very clear sense, that the self as an identity, as a personality, is not something that has absolute reality substance any more. So a feeling that there is a clear seeing, understanding that the usual things that we take as self—my personality, my body, my thoughts, my feelings, my emotions, my biography, my history, you know, my family—all these things which have some certain kind of reality are not really so interesting or not so valid as claiming, This is who I really am. I don't know if this works as an analogy or as pointing to this, but I'll try. I'll try without the help of a mirror.

I know we can't see our eyes, but our eyes function. Have you tried to turn your eyes around quite quickly so you can take a look at your eyes? But if you kind of use your eyes to try to get a sense of your eyes, what happens? You can't quite get there, can you? Maybe a little bit like trying to touch your right elbow with your right hand. You can't quite do it, right?

You can touch your right hand. Now there's an elbow there, but so you know. You know there's eyes there, but you can't quite see them. But we try to see them. How much space is there behind your eyes? Does it make sense to talk about space behind your eyes? Are your eyes as you try to look at your eyes? Are they transparent? Are they invisible? Do they kind of disappear?

They're there, but you can't quite get to them. So it's similar with the sense of self. If you try to find the self, it's kind of like trying to look for your eyes. You won't find it. Does that mean that there is no self? Or there is a self that you can't find back there, like there are eyes, right? So therefore, use the same analogy. And it must be a self, but just you can't get to it. Whether there is a self or not a self is not so important. What's important is if you try to look for a self, you won't find it.

And once you get a sense that the self is kind of like the eye that you can't find, then you're not going to take, Oh, my face that's my true self, or My emotional life is my true self, or My history is my truth, or My job, you know, my status. You cannot realize that when you turn back to look at the self, it's not. It's a transparent kind of empty phenomenon that kind of doesn't work to pin something on to. It's kind of like you try to do water painting on water. You know, you're not going to get much of a painting, especially if it's flowing water. It just doesn't stick.

So to have some sense that there's that nothing, that the self there's no, there's no self upon which you can pin anything on to. It's transparent. It's translucent. It's transparent. It's empty. It's spacious. It's peaceful. It's vast. It's nothing. It disappears.

It's still. It's quiet. And this sense that I said to the first transformation is overcoming the personality of you, or the belief in a solid, substantial self. And I bet many of you have overcome or grown out of certain, grown out of the tendency to take certain parts of who you are as yourself: This is who I really am. And like for me, I can remember really well how utterly wrapped up or how incredibly closely bound my sense of self was to what was connected to the presence or absence of self. It wasn't so long ago, but then that one doesn't really get me much any more.

Now I don't know that myself is not tied up with my sense of self. You know, I couldn't care less. And so, you know, there's all kinds of ways things we grow out of, you know, maybe at some point, success and failure at work, or perhaps having a particular job. It's like the bell and end all of your sense of self and success, and at some point it loses its appeal, for you realize, I mean, not you can tie your sense of self to that. Or, you know, there there's all kinds of things that change, and of people who get sick. Some people get, you know, chronic diseases, and, you know, there's certain kinds of preoccupation with trying to present themselves in a good way that just doesn't work any more.

After one woman I know who's had, I don't know, oh, probably at least twenty surgeries. One more surgery that disfigures her face or something. Her sense of self is not tied to her face any more. It just dissipates after all these years of surgery. Just, you know, well, she is glad to be alive. A friend of mine was meditating in India, and a teacher was giving a Dharma talk, and looked right at him and said, You are not your face, and the whole world vanished from him. Everything dropped. And that was one of the most important kind of experiences he had in his meditation life, was having everything—the whole world, self, everything—just dropped away.

So now the shock, some being told you are not your face, somehow it just kind of helped his mind just let go. So the first transformation is a kind of giving up of a certain kind of belief or clinging to self. The second transformation that happens is giving up a clinging or a belief in the efficacy of religious ethics, precepts, and religious practices. Isn't that strange? After all, that's in all this huffing and puffing. People spend a lot of time practising and practising practising living an ethical life. And in the first kind of experience of realization, you kind of are giving up the belief in that.

But that's party time, right? Finally, you know, finally I knew this Buddhist practice was kind of, you know, was a little bit off, and finally got it. That's not quite what it's about. But it does point that there is a lot of clinging, a lot of attachment around religion. There is an identity that people have to religion, you know. And I've known people who've worn religious

outfits when I was at the first. I came to San Francisco Zen Center to practice there in the late seventies. There was a kind of uniform, that unofficial uniform of those people who really were really cool, and it's important to be cool.

And they wore these fat pants, these big kind of bulky pants that you could meditate in. And then there was some kind of Hamish vest and a Danish school bag. And then you could always, you know, add a few things, you know, there, a few other mode Buddhist paraphernalia. Could add they really do it well. And, you know, I can see a little, but you, they're all kind of practical things. So it made sense. The first person, you discovered all these things. But when it became a uniform, you got a sense of the attachment people had to proving their identity as a Zen Buddhist, and, you know, all kind of land, all Buddhist traditions. You know, I know of people get attached to identity and being a certain kind of Buddhist. I'm a Buddhist, thank you. So important. Every one sees that. So that's one form of attachment to identity.

Another attachment is a kind of attachment to security, to being right. Buddhism is one of the great world religions. It has great authority and prestige and power. You get non-profit status in America, and, you know, the government takes it seriously. So, you know, when I was a new Zen student, my mother didn't know much about Zen or Buddhism, but somehow or other she picked up that the governor of California back then hung out in Zen circles. So this Zen stuff couldn't be all that bad. So you saw you had a great religion, right? So people feel like I finally got it. The truth, this is it. I don't quite understand it yet, but we cling to it is going to save us, because now I know I'm right. The idea of being clinging to being right, a clinging to religion because it's going to save us.

Note continued, in particular, the clinging to rites, you sometimes is translated as clinging to rites and rituals, which is a kind of Victorian way of translating this. The actual Pāli is *sīla*, which means ethics or virtue, and *bata* or *vata*, and *vata* means practice, practices. So it's the belief that somehow in doing the practice, some of the practice itself, or adhering to ethics itself, is liberation, is going to do it. And the ethics and practices are a necessary part of the path. We can't dispense with them, for we can't cling to them as being the only thing necessary. To say it simply, there also has to be a profound letting go, that happens.

And if you hold on to mindfulness practice, concentration practice, or virtue as being it, that's going to be a barrier to liberation. They can only take you so far. And so the experience of entering the stream shows you that something different is needed, that above and beyond just doing the practices. The third transformation is a transformation of a giving, of no longer having uncertainty about what is and is not the path. And it's said that it's kind of discouraging, maybe, but it's said that you don't really practise Buddhism until you've had the first

experience of liberation. So people practise Buddhism for years and years without any real experience of liberation, for they are still practising, but you don't really know what it's about until you've tasted it for yourself.

You might know, you might know in theory what swimming is about, and you know it's possible to learn to swim, and you can even read books about it and take lessons in it. But when you've really learned to swim yourself, then you have no more uncertainty about that. It's possible to learn to swim because you've really learned it. So in the same way, when you really have the experience of liberation, there's no more uncertainty what it's all about. And there's no more uncertainty at what the path is about, what it takes to get there, the work that needs to be done. They are things it has to happen.

So those others are said to be the three primary markers of how a person is changed by this first, by this entering the stream. There is a couple of other minor things that are mentioned. One of them is that the person is prone to or seriously prone to being ethical, that the person who has entered the stream is very unlikely they're going to do something seriously unethical any more because of what's here changed and transformed, some inner sensitivity that's awakened. And the other, maybe in the corollary to that, is the idea that once you've entered the stream, you'll never get reborn again in hell. So this is a traditional Buddhist idea. Having to do with the idea of rebirth, that once you've had stream entry, you'll never get reborn in hell.

For those people who don't adhere to the idea of rebirth, it can be understood that you're not going to find yourself in hellish mental states in this lifetime any more than you're saved from serious bouts of anxiety, depression, despair. Kind of very kind of hell realms people go into, no matter what happens to you, no matter what happens to your external world or your health, that somehow you're saved from the hellish mental realms that might happen. It's another thing that happens. I want to go back if I may. I get to the, you know, if you're a captive audience, right? I get to I get this eminent profession where I can just have monologues and no one interrupts. And it's a rare thing, right? I try to do this at home and doesn't quite work.

It's a little bit maybe paradoxical. This idea of giving, of letting go, the belief in a self, in a substantial kind of self, or taking something as my personality, because you could say, Well, I'm the kind of person who's given up in the belief in self. And with liberation comes a kind of not caring so much in a certain way about whether you are or are not liberated. No, you don't know, tying your sense of self to it so much. Once upon a time, in a Zen monastery, Japan. There came a young man to practise there, and he was quite an exceptional man.

He had been raised with a good, very good education. The parents were well to do. He was extremely smart, very talented at a lot of different capacities. Things were relatively easy for him in his life, maybe because of that, and because of his great intelligence and perception. He had actually studied many of the religions of the world because he felt that something more was needed. He wanted the unseen world, something more than this world. That was kind of the idea of pursuing money or status or the many things that his parents wanted him to do just didn't have much meaning for him. So he studied religion, and he settled on Buddhism and into the Zen monasteries in order to get enlightened.

And yet he really impressed people because of all his capacity that he had. And certainly, sure enough, when he entered the monastery, his practice unfolded very quickly. He practised, was very diligent, he was very disciplined, he was very perceptive, astute in his practice, overcame a lot of the hindrances pretty easily, got very concentrated pretty easily and quickly. And the other monks were amazed. And who's this guy? We've been practising here sweating ourselves for a long time, and we've made progress, but it's really slow, and this guy just seems to be breezing along. And then within a few months of being in the monastery, he had his first experience of realization of stream entry, at which point the abbot kicked him out of the monastery. It wouldn't even let him kind of protest. Have time to protest. We get gage.

And in Japan, when you become a monk, it's a very dramatic thing to do socially, because Japanese culture is very, how to say it, the social network is very powerful in Japan. Will you fit in the social network? And if you ever step outside of the social network that you're born into or you're raised in or something like that, it's very hard to come back in again. So in Japan, in America, if you could or get ordained as a Zen priest, you can do it for a while and then go back and get a job. And you know, don't tell anybody. It's fine. But in Japan, if you step out of and become a Zen priest, it's like you stepped out of you. You've disconnected yourself with society, and society doesn't open its doors again up to let you in and you really step out. This man was kicked back out on the street, out, out, out with no support, anything. And the other monks were amazed. Why did you do that? The man has all this promise. He was so capable. He had his first experience of realization. Why did you kick him out? And the abbot said he hadn't suffered enough. He hadn't suffered enough. He had to realize, yet he had to somehow develop or discover a greater degree of humility, or had to somehow be able to whittle away at his conceit. And the place where conceit was going to whittle away was not here in the monastery. He had to go back into the world to have that experience.

Even though a person gives up the belief in himself, there can still be conceit. And the differ-

ence is one, is it? It's more of an insight. The first realization for entering a stream is, is an insight understanding, a cognitive shift that happens. But a cognitive shift, as difficult as it is, is much more difficult than an affective shift, a shift in affect, a shift in our emotional motivations and what drives us. And conceit belongs to that world of affect, not of understanding. So once a person has entered the stream, the next kind of level of work that needs to be done has to do with the affective level of a human being. And the tradition talks about then beginning to lessen and finally do away with a greed addiction, the forces of desire, lust, as well as the forces of ill will and anger and aversion.

So as we cannot get, find ourselves deeper and deeper in the stream going, flowing along, the lessening and lessening of these forces. But the forces of greed and hate don't disappear with them. With first entering the stream, more work has to happen. And as this, as greed and hate lessen and lessen, from some point they are supposed to disappear entirely. Then one of things that's left to do is to overcome conceit, a tendency to kind of compare ourselves, self, and others various ways, or to take it, I'm the one who was enlightened, thank you, the sense that I know that there's one here.

So the path to liberation begins with mindfulness. It's strengthened with concentration. The doors to liberation are opened with by insight. Mindfulness brings concentration. Concentration brings more mindfulness. Mindfulness and concentration together bring insight. Insight opens the doors for the possibility of liberation. It can seem like a long path, but liberation, freedom is only as far away. It's as close to you as your own breath. It's as close to you as the experience of your eyes looking right now.

It's not something that is so far away. It's as close to you as the space that surrounds you. And the stillness that's in that space is as close to you, is as close as the blinking of an eye. And I believe that's a well before entering the stream that some people can have an intuition or a sense of a possibility of being free, of being without compulsions, without contractions, without clings of the mind or the heart, or the heart and the mind are set free, or are at peace, or become boundless, or become transparent, or become still, or become empty, or disappear. There can be an intuitive sense of that, or a feeling of it that's right here, not so far away. Awakening beckons us from within everything. And perhaps it's in stillness that you can get the clearer sense of freedom, of peace.

And so there is a poem by the Basho, the Japanese poet. That goes: The temple bell stops. So it rings. You hear the ringing. The temple bell stops, but the sound keeps coming out of the flowers. What is that? After the after the ringing stops, what is it that comes out of the flowers? What is it that comes out of everything?

Liberation, the path to liberation, begins with mindfulness. No moment of mindfulness is ever wasted. A moment of pure mindfulness partakes of liberation. There is an echo or resonance of freedom in one pure moment of mindfulness. And one of the meanings of that is that, one of the implications of that is that the means, the goal, is found in the means that even though the goal of liberation can be seen in something that's far away, it's also something that's supposed to be found in the very means towards it, so as to some way of practising mindfulness. So that moment of mindfulness is a moment of being free of greed, of hate, aversion, or clinging. Just seeing what it is, just this moment, just this breath, just this feeling, just this thought, just a sound, very simply this moment.

And whether a person has entered the stream or not, the practice of mindfulness is the same. And what's very important is, after entering a stream, is continual practising. Some people will stop practising after they've entered the stream, that taste, that experience. And I think it's a great waste. It's not uncommon for Buddhists to hear stories of Buddhist teachers. Someone comes to a Buddha teacher and says, Oh, I've had some great realization experience. If it's funny, you got it, and the teacher will yawn or say, Oh, just something else you to let go of now, somehow be dismissive of it because of the tendency to cling to that, holding to that and doing and clinging not continue with the practice moment by moment.

Realization, entering stream is a really beautiful thing, phenomenally beautiful experience. Abandoned life. But at least as beautiful and profound is a moment of practice and the commitment to practice, dedication to make practice a central part of one's life, and to do it moment after moment, to do it before realization, during realization, after realization. Just coming back to practice, just moment by moment, almost as if you know realization. It is almost incidental if it happens, because what's important is just keep doing the practice, keep in the practice, keep it going, keep it going. If you keep it going that way, just focusing on the practice, maybe the abbot won't have to kick you out of the monastery. Practice, practice, practice. May all of you love the practice. Thank you very much. Practice, practice, practice. May all of you love the practice. Thank you very much.