

Tuesday Dharma Talk – Contentment in the Dharma

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Gil Fronsdal

This afternoon I want to talk a little bit about the first instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the instructions on breathing. Then I will talk a little bit about contentment. Maybe talking about contentment is also talking about discontent.

The instructions begin with the Buddha telling us to establish mindfulness at the forefront – establish awareness here. In the five qualities of the *Dhamma* that I talked about yesterday, the fifth quality of the *Dhamma* is something “to be experienced personally by the wise.” In the word “personally,” (among all the teachings that might not be about something like that) there is a big emphasis on really being present here – that we’re important and valuable human beings, and it is *here* that the heart of the *Dhamma* work has to happen. Somehow, to experience it here for ourselves, to establish attention here, because where else are you going to be?

I like to say that the body is always here, but the mind is only sometimes here. Our thoughts are sometimes about the past, the future, and other places. If we want to have the body and mind in harmony, the task is to bring the mind into the same place and time as the body. It’s remarkable what can happen when the body and mind are in harmony, when they’re in the same place at the same time, connecting to the same thing, cooperating in the same presence and attention here.

The *sutta* goes on to talk about mindfulness of breathing. The first line emphasizes “I” until you hear it:

When a practitioner has a long breath, they know, “I have a long breath.”

When I have a long inhale, and when I have a long exhale, I know it’s a long inhale and exhale.

When the practitioner has a short inhale or a short exhale, the practitioner knows, “I have a short inhale or a short exhale.”

The practitioner is really affirming something here so there’s no doubt about it – *I’m* the one who’s having this experience. The problem with the “I” is that it’s a magnet for all kinds of other associations and ideas, and all kinds of other attachments. But in the simplicity of it, “I” can be quite innocent and appropriate – yes, *this* is my experience. *This* is the place of practice.

So, when breathing long, the practitioner knows, “I am breathing long.” When breathing short, the practitioner knows, “I am breathing short.” I take this instruction as shorthand for whatever characteristics are obvious in the breathing. It is obvious and we know it clearly: the breathing is rough today. It’s smooth today. The breathing is tight and constricted. The breathing is loose and fluid. The breathing is all kinds of different ways. The breathing is mostly in the chest today. It’s mostly in the belly today. Everything shifts and changes, so the instruction is to recognize what the breathing is.

The *sutta* goes on to say:

Breathing in and breathing out, the practitioner experiences the whole body (senses the whole body or feels the whole body).

This is what happens naturally if you sit down and are quiet for a while, maybe following your breath to calm down more. At some point, you become more aware of the body. The body begins showing itself, sometimes because the knees start hurting, and it speaks up that way. But sometimes a settled awareness tends to begin to spread a little bit into the body, and we become more aware of it.

Some people like to begin a meditation session with mindfulness of the body, and that helps them get settled and develop their mindfulness. It's a lot easier for some people than the breathing, which can be complicated for some people. So some people prefer to get grounded in the body, letting the body be the container that can hold everything, the context.

For some people the body needs attention. Without the body getting some caring, loving attention, the inner challenges we have can be much more difficult. For other people, the body is so difficult that it's better just to be with the breathing. That feels more neutral for some people. This can vary for an individual over time. Sometimes it is useful for the breathing to be the center of gravity, and sometimes the body. This can go back and forth.

But in the instructions, at some point, the idea is to feel the whole body. I interpret this to mean the global physical body – to become embodied, to sense and feel the body from the inside out. Not an easy task. Many people are disconnected from the body. Many people have carried a lot of challenging feelings in their bodies, so it is kind of challenging to become embodied. But this is the idea in the Dharma practice. This is the direction we're going. It might take a while, but over time, we can become so fully embodied that we can say, "Yeah, the whole body is part of my field of awareness. I'm centered in this body, and the whole thing is a whole."

I think that is one of the many gifts I have received from Dharma practice. Becoming embodied was a very slow process for me. It took years to reach the point where I could say, "Wow, now I feel centered and rooted in this body. I feel at home in it." The process of coming to that home in the body was long, but it was really worthwhile and beneficial.

One reason it's beneficial to become embodied is that the body has a tremendous amount of information in it. The body is not just a hunk of flesh. The body has evolved to be a very sensitive instrument for being attuned to the environment around us. I mean, it's amazing that we can hear, and see, and smell, and touch, and taste. Nowadays, people have other senses as well. We have balance or proprioception as a sense, and there are all kinds of other senses that people now recognize beyond the five senses.

There are many nerves that can pick up all kinds of information in the body – in the stomach, in the brain, in the ears, all kinds of places. The more we are awakened to our body – the more that sensitivity is available to us – the more that information is available to us. There is so much information to be had that helps us live a wiser life. If we're disconnected from ourselves and don't get all those cues, then we're not being informed.

Sometimes people override what's healthy for their body because they're not paying attention to the cues. I've read there are people who for some reason don't have nerves that register pain, so they don't experience any physical pain. Apparently, that's very dangerous. They hurt themselves pretty badly sometimes and don't know that they've been hurt. Apparently, it's not a particularly happy life to not have pain. You'd think it's desirable, right? But actually, we need to have pain to find our way through life, take care of ourselves, and be aware of the damage that gets done.

Pain is supposed to be something we need to protect ourselves from. It turns out that it's a very helpful experience to have pain within reason, within a certain range. Pain is part of the very important information that comes into us. How often are we happy that we have that ability to experience pain? "There's that pain. Wow." The ability to experience pain is probably responsible for the survival of the species, and it has come right down to me. I'm the inheritor of this fantastic capacity. Yeah, I'm somewhat content that I have it. It's a little bit too strong today, but still, pretty cool."

Probably most of you are not going to think this way. But here's this wonderful body and there are all kinds of things here. The body is valuable interpersonally too, because it also picks up a lot of the cues from the environment, including interpersonal cues. If we're not grounded in our bodies and tuning into all the sensations

from muscles that tighten up and nerves that get fired, we gather less information from the social cues about what's happening around us.

So dropping into the body and letting it speak to us and reveal itself to us is one of the gifts of this practice of mindfulness of the body. One of the things the body will show us is discomfort, in the form of tension and contraction. That is actually very important information for Dharma practitioners because when we are tense in our body, that's a message that something is going on more deeply within us. Something is happening in our emotions, our responses to the world, our impulses, our desires, our aversions, or our fears. The tension we carry in our bodies is like a doorway to a deeper connection to ourselves if we step through that door. If we are just tense, it is as if the door to a deeper connection is closed.

The idea in these instructions is to feel your whole body, and when you feel tension and the muscles or the brain are tight, relax and calm the body. I don't know what's the best term for "calming." Some translators translate the Pali word as "tranquillize." That might give the wrong impression to some English speakers (you get a little dart to tranquillize you). But I love the word "calm." I like the word "relax." Calm the body. Let the body become calmer. Release, let go, and soften the muscles that are tight and tense.

The advantage of doing this is that the more the body relaxes and the tension releases, the more sensitive the body becomes as an instrument of perception. There's more information and more sensitivity there. Some of the information is not pain or tension. Some of it is pleasure. In fact, releasing tension has a kind of pleasure in it, maybe even a kind of joy, delight, or enjoyment in it.

So when we feel there's tension, rather than being upset with it, we can feel, "This is good. I have a practice to meet this. I have a practice to work with this." It's not necessarily easy to let go of the tension and relax. Sometimes things won't relax no matter how much we want them to. But we have a practice of attention, of presence, of letting go of our judgments, resistance, and aversion. We have a practice to see what is really going on in a deeper way.

So one of the possibilities in this practice is to be happy that you have the opportunity to practice – or to say it differently, to be really content that you can practice. This is also a paradigm shift for many people in our society, for many of you, and often for me. When there's something uncomfortable, painful, or tense, an aversion, we feel we have to fix it – something is wrong. We've got to make it go away.

The paradigm shift is: Yes, it's okay to want to have discomfort go away. But rather than doing it out of discontent or unhappiness, it is possible to experience a kind of Dharmic happiness. "Oh, I have a practice to address this. I have a practice that can help me be free in the midst of it."

The happiness and contentment about having the practice go right back to the beginning of the instructions: to establish mindfulness here. Because now there's more enthusiasm. "Oh, yes. Yes. I'm into this now. At first, I did it just because it was the instruction. But I've got it now. This is really good. So yes, I'm going to show up here. I'm going to be here. I'm going to establish myself in awareness here and now with the body and mind together."

Yesterday I talked about the *Dhamma* as a way of beginning the retreat. I wanted to say something more about the *Dhamma*. There is a quote I will read. This has to do with the Buddha's disciple, *Sariputta*. Another wanderer, a spiritual practitioner, approached *Sariputta* and they greeted each other and had a talk.

The wanderer said to Venerable Sariputta, "Friend, what is happiness in this Dhamma and training, and what is suffering?"

I suppose a few of you can answer that question today. What is the suffering in this *Dhamma*?

Sariputta answers:

"Discontent, friend, is suffering in this Dhamma and training. Contentment is happiness in the Dhamma."

That's kind of a significant statement: the happiness of the *Dhamma* is contentment, and discontent is to be unhappy in relation to the *Dhamma*.

When there is discontent, this Dhamma suffering is to be expected.

Then the text goes on:

When you have discontent, when walking, one does not find happiness or comfort. When standing still, one does not find happiness or comfort. When sitting, one does not find happiness or comfort. When lying down, one does not find happiness or comfort. When in the village, one does not find happiness or comfort. When in the forest, one does not find happiness or comfort. When in the open air, one does not find happiness or comfort. When amid other practitioners, one does not find happiness and comfort.

This is what happens when there is discontent. When we're discontented it's easy to see all kinds of things as not right and to be unhappy and uncomfortable with them.

When there is discontent, this is the suffering to be expected. When there is contentment, this Dhamma happiness is to be expected: that is, when walking, one finds happiness and comfort. When standing still, one finds happiness and comfort. When sitting... when lying down...when in the village... when in the forest...when at the foot of a tree...when in an empty hut... when in the open air...when amid the bhikkhus... [the practitioners]...one finds happiness and comfort. When there is contentment, this is the happiness to be expected.

I thought that was nice. I think it's nice only if it inspires us to practice with discontent – to practice when we're unhappy and uncomfortable because it's reasonable to assume that we'll have discomfort and unhappiness. We are not wrong if we're unhappy, rather, this is where the practice is found. So we address unhappiness, meet it, and practice with it. But we keep as a guideline the reference point of being content. Be content with your circumstances.

In other teachings the Buddha encouraged the importance of contentment with the food you're given, the housing you're given, the clothes you have, and the situation you're in. Cultivate contentment. Why? Because this is what supports the meditative mind to let go, settle, and be focused. Without some modicum of contentment with our circumstances, the mind is going to be agitated, discontented, spinning, and reacting.

So if you want to have happiness in the *Dhamma*, give more attention to being content with what you have. Be content to be able to practice in a community and content with the specialness of having the *Dhamma*, having this practice. I don't know exactly where you'll find your contentment, but it might be supportive to be very careful not to give in to or live in discontent. ("Those things are not quite right; it should be different. Yesterday we had better weather but today it's too cool for me to go out in my favorite T-shirt.") Maybe that's petty or too silly to say, but be very careful with discontent. Don't give it free reign; don't let it be in charge.

The text emphasizes being personally known by the wise – "This Dharma is to be personally practiced by the wise." I would like to challenge you by saying that if you're discontented, you're not practicing. If you practice with the discontent, then I hope that at least you are content that you can practice – "How lucky I am, this is good."

The other reason I like this quote is that it puts happiness, comfort, and contentment in a prominent place. These are actually important qualities that we're developing, focusing on, tuning in to, and learning to recognize. A lot of people in our society have not learned to value and appreciate well-being when they have it. It's very easy to be disconnected from the body, to be up in the head, and there are a lot of things to be discontented about. If you don't feel like you have enough discontent in your life, I can provide you with a very, very long list. There's no shortage of that – you can get busy. You have three weeks here. That's a lot of time to get through the list of reasons for discontent.

But we're here to do the opposite. So be very careful to notice the tension of discontent. Then feel that tension in your body. The more we feel this discontent in the whole body, the more we might find an opportunity to let something relax and soften in the body.

There is a remarkable loop that exists between the body and the mind, and the body and the heart. If we get anxious and tighten up, the tension feels uncomfortable. If we react to that discomfort, we might feel even more anxious. Then we tense up more. But if we relax the physical tension, that's a condition that helps the heart relax. The body and the mind, and the body and the heart are very much in relationship with each other.

Start by tuning into the body rather than giving precedence to the stories, thoughts, and ideas. Feel, sense, be here with this. Let something relax. As it relaxes, then begin to feel the pleasure of the relaxation, the softening, and the energy that gets released. If you've been tense for a long time and you can suddenly relax the tension, the tingling, warmth, and sparkle that follow the release of the tension can feel delicious.

Sometimes it's very subtle, but it's helpful in Dharma practice to feel that pleasure, goodness, and sparkle, no matter how small it is. Take it in. Because we're allowed to have pleasure, we're allowed to have contentment, we're allowed to have comfort here. I interpret this teaching of *Sariputta* to mean that contentment is an important means of experiencing Dharma happiness and Dharma comfort.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* goes on with the next exercises, which are related to what I just talked about. It says:

When walking, a practitioner knows, "I am walking." When standing one knows, "I am standing." When sitting one knows, "I am sitting." When lying down one knows, "I am lying down." Where in whatever way one's body is disposed, that one knows.

So you don't get much credit when you go to a block party and people ask, "What is the religious practice you do?" and you answer, "When walking, I know I'm walking. When sitting, I know I'm sitting." People won't understand how significant it is to really know you're standing. I mean: to know it in an embodied way, fully, like this is all that you know. You're not thinking about supper while standing and knowing you're standing. You're just really there, in the simplicity, aliveness, and presence of that. This is what's happening: "I'm standing here."

Again here we have the word "I." It is self-referential. It refers to the person who's saying this. "Here, to be known by the wise, I am standing." Everything stops. Everything else is allowed to fade away for a few moments. Here – "I am sitting here. I am standing, walking, lying down" (in whatever posture you're in).

I believe this is also very helpful because our posture is a form of language. It's an expression. It's a form of communication about how we're feeling, our impulses, our motivations, and our attitudes. So much gets expressed in our posture – in our hands, arms, legs, and how we position them. There's a lot to be learned about oneself in observing one's posture. Are we collapsed? Are we pulling back, pulling away? Are we turning away? Are we stepping towards? How are we with our posture? I think that it's phenomenally helpful for Dharma practice to take care with recognizing your posture so you can read early what kind of attitudes and impulses you're operating under.

The next instruction is to tie these two teachings together. Here the *sutta* says:

If one has contentment, then when walking, one has happiness and comfort.

Contentment is available in something as simple as walking, for example, when walking out of this meditation hall and down the steps. I don't know how many times I've walked out of here mindful as can be, and it lasts maybe to the fourth step down. Then my mind is off thinking about, "Should I get tea? What kind of tea should I have? There are other people ahead of me. Will they get to the tea station before me? I'll have to wait. I don't have time to wait because I have a tight schedule here."

So I'm kind of lost in my thoughts going down the steps. The alternative is to walk out of here and know that I'm walking and be content with that. To be happy to be in the walking; to walk down the steps and know that I'm walking down the steps; to be content going down the steps; to walk across the community room downstairs and to stay present and mindful as I do that ... as opposed to letting the thinking mind start to drift off and carry me away to plans about what tea to get.

This instruction is to really know what you're doing, to inhabit what you're doing as you do it. This is an instruction to practice in all your postures, all the time – to know.

The *sutta* goes on to say:

When going forward and coming back, one acts with clear understanding [with clear comprehension].

There is not only knowing, there is also a kind of clarity of understanding – “This is walking, this is why I’m walking, this is how I’m walking, this is what’s happening as I’m walking, I’m in the experience of walking, and this is what it’s like.” You are not only walking but inhabiting the experience so that there’s a deeper understanding and knowing of all the things about what’s happening as you’re walking, including what’s happening in your mind and heart. This way you don’t get disconnected from yourself because you’re trying to figure out what tea to have, or whatever the mind is doing.

I love this list because it’s so basic to what we do all the time.

In looking towards something or looking away, one does so with clear comprehension.

How often do you look someplace without a clear understanding that you’re looking, where your looking is unconscious?

When bending or stretching [I think it means bending or stretching one’s arm] one does so with clear comprehension. When holding one’s clothes, one acts with clear comprehension. When eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting, one acts with clear comprehension. When urinating and defecating, one does so with clear comprehension. When walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent one acts with clear comprehension.

I’ve read this many times over the decades. The first decade I read this, I probably fell asleep, or glossed over it, or decided, “This is not so deeply spiritual, and this is not what it’s really all about.” I don’t know exactly what I did, but I certainly did not pay attention to it. It’s kind of dull, boring, and matter of fact. How interested can I get in being really present with stretching my arm out to get the cup of tea? I mean, I have important tea to get. Do I really have to stop and pay attention to stretching my arm out to pick up the teacup?

But this instruction is pointing to the steady, ongoing, gradual cultivation of presence, attention, and mindfulness – the cultivation of a deeper kind of knowing of our life as we go through it. The bumper sticker for us would be, “I stop for knowing. I stop to know.” So we ask, “What’s here? What can I know? Yes, I can know that I’m standing. I can know I’m here in my body. I can know I’m tense. I can know I’m discontented. I can know.” The emphasis on knowing comes back over and over again at the beginning of this text.

The last thing I want to do this afternoon is to repeat that knowing is the simplest act of recognition of something. For us, this often happens kind of subconsciously. There’s so much to recognize in our daily life all the time that if we were consciously recognizing everything that we perceive and process in our environment, we wouldn’t have any bandwidth left for an ordinary conversation. There’s so much that we’re recognizing all the time at the subconscious level. Because it is subconscious we can process a tremendous amount of data and also have a conversation with someone.

For instance, it seems silly to point out that sitting up here, I know the floor is down there. But I’ve been here in this room hundreds of times without looking down and seeing, “Oh, there’s a floor.” I’m operating as if this is a floor. I am fully cognizant that this is not a floor. But it certainly behaves like one, so I can use it that way.

There is a kind of subconscious, I’d like to say almost effortless, knowing that’s quietly going on all the time. This knowing is not a magnet for attachments, judgments, clinging, and preferences. If I spend time thinking about the floor, I might have some preferences about it. But I’ve operated many, many times here without that. It’s a floor and I’m walking on it or sitting on it, and something knows that. The knowing is so simple, it doesn’t come with anything extra.

It is possible to be quiet and sensitive enough to start recognizing some of the simple moments of recognition, which for some people might be nonverbal. There’s a knowing that’s nonverbal, where you feel or sense what’s happening. For some people, knowing is more verbal, but it can be really rudimentary – very quiet, wispy, light, and easeful. It just kind of floats there and has no weight or tension associated with it.

As we do the knowing practice, recognizing the quiet, ongoing way in which we recognize that we know can start to give us a taste for a mindfulness (an awareness, a knowing) that doesn't require a lot of will (or any will). It doesn't require a choice. The choice is being made by the mind itself or some deeper place. It doesn't require strain or work; it's just what's happening.

For instance, there's a car driving past on the road. Maybe you didn't really register it consciously, but it was taken in. Five seconds later you realize, "Oh yeah, a car just went by." This was initially registered and known maybe in a way that was prior to attachment and preferences. The ability to be quiet enough to start appreciating this way of knowing will help train us to do that when we're practicing mindfulness more intentionally and when the recognitions are more robust. "Oh, hearing a sound – sound."

As I said this morning, I think these moments of recognition that we have in mindfulness practice are not the end of the story. They are the beginning of the practice. A sound of cars – "Hearing." Then open to hear it. What's fun about car sounds is that if you recognize the sound a little late when it's almost gone by and you say, "Hearing", if you are open, mostly you hear it fading away. That's kind of cool. Ah.

Some things don't go away that easily. But the point is not to have things go away. The point is to start having a sense and understanding of how to be mindful in a really simple way, where you're not working at it. The main work is remembering to do it and staying close to that.

As I've said, there are different grades or levels and different ways in which we know things. It's very interesting for practitioners to be able to start noticing how, in any individual act of being mindful, there might be an unfolding of different kinds of knowing. There might be knowing that has no attachment to it. There might be a stronger knowing that does have attachment and preferences in it. Look at that – that's interesting.

We need a different kind of knowing or recognition if we want to memorize something. Did you ever try to memorize a phone number, for example? If a friend rattles off their phone number, it just goes right by and, "Yeah, that was a number." To memorize a number, you need a heightened attention to listen and take it in. When mindfulness is robust, it's more like the heightened attention needed for memorizing. "I want to have this experience. Let me register this now. Breathing in, let me register that. Now let me be open to really sense and feel this inhale." This is not as if you're going to memorize the experience, but as if you could because you're really there for it in that way.

When I was in Burma with U Pandita, we had to keep a notebook where, at the end of every sitting, we wrote down what the practice was like during that sitting. A lot of the way that U Pandita taught us was centered on how we'd bring that notebook to him to report on our meditation. We had to learn how to report in a very particular way. Partly it was very impersonal. We couldn't say, "Oh, you know, I had a hard day today and I sat there and I felt sorry for myself because my parents didn't give me enough granola growing up." He wanted us to say something like, "Today I was discouraged. I recognized that it was discouragement. I really knew that was what it was. I felt kind of heavy. I felt a tension in my belly and tightness in my mind. I noted those things, and some of them went away and some of them didn't."

And he'd say, "Great." He couldn't care less about the granola. The story about the granola was completely beside the point for him. Because we couldn't tell this terrible story about not getting enough granola growing up, we were trained not to pay attention in that way. Instead, we learned to pay attention to the immediacy of the experience independent of the story and the self-pity we might have. Also, the need to report and write down the experience gave energy, aliveness, and vitality to paying attention. I thought, "Oh! What's happening to me is important. I have to let it register fully enough to be able to remember it later." This turned out to be phenomenally helpful for me. It really brought me into the present moment in a wonderful way and pulled me into the practice.

I don't know if I conveyed this to you in a way that makes it helpful to you, but what I was trying to say is there are different ways in which we know and experience. We can feel and experience it physically. We can sense it. We can recognize it. We can observe it. We can hold it in an empty field of awareness. As we start recognizing that we have options and there are different ways in which knowing operates, when we go back to the beginning practice – "Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in. Breathing out, I know I'm breathing out" – that knowing can become a richer phenomenon. It has more dimensions to it.

Experiencing the whole body. It is not just the whole body that has become fuller. It is also that the different ways that we know and are aware have been awakened. It becomes richer, more fascinating, and more engaging to really be here. Then we go back to the beginning since we are always a beginner. Establishing awareness here. Taking a stand in our practice here. Being present here. Stepping into the presence of attention here.

The word "*paṭṭhāna*" in "*satipaṭṭhāna*" is sometimes translated as "foundation" or "establishment." One scholar says one of the meanings in Pali is "to stand near, to stand close to something, to attend to what's happening." Sometimes what we attend to in this way is discontent, our tensions, or our suffering. Dharma contentment is knowing you have a practice to meet that experience. Dharma happiness is knowing you have a practice that meets your unhappiness. When Dharma happiness meets happiness, that's pretty special. When Dharma contentment meets contentment in you, that's pretty special.

If there's one thing I hope that you'll take from this talk, it is to give yourself kindly and gently over to this practice in all your activities throughout the day, including walking down the steps, eating, cleaning, and doing your work, because it's such a rich opportunity. There's no obligation to do it. You're not wrong if you don't do it, but it's such a rich opportunity here to stand close to your life, to establish your attention here, and then start discovering the depths and the richness of it all right here. May all your activities be dharma activities.
Thank you.