

Saturday Dharma Talk – Mind States Part 2

Hybrid Experienced Students Retreat at IRC

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The *Dhamma* is to be personally known by the wise. We are going to begin by highlighting the idea of “personal.” The other four qualities of the *Dhamma* are first, that it's visible (sometimes they say “visible here and now”). Second, it is immediate. Third, it is “inviting inspection” – the literal expression is “come and see.” Fourth, it is onward leading. And fifth, it is “to be known personally by the wise.”

This practice of *Satipaṭṭhāna* is a path toward what is more and more personal. If it's a path that goes inward from the outside to what's more personal, rather than going inward by powers of ten, maybe you go inward until there's nothing left. The process becomes more and more personal, more precious, more wondrous, maybe even more beautiful, more free, and more freeing. It is just a wonderful path, a wonderful direction to go in.

Of course, the mind, the heart, will go wherever it goes. At some point, the mind gloriously lets go of all clinging. I like to think that the mind lets go of itself. One of the descriptions of awakening the Buddha repeats is: “The mind was liberated through non-clinging.” He didn't claim the *person* was enlightened or liberated.

So the mind is quite an important reference point. The topic of the third foundation is the observation of the mind in terms of just the mind. The literal meaning is “the observation of the mind in the mind.” The *sutta* begins with observing the body in terms of the body, then the feeling tones in terms of the feeling tones, and now the mind in terms of the mind.

I think of this process as coming in closer, deeper, and becoming more and more personal. Many of the things we take as personal and that we use to define ourselves by or recognize ourselves by are not mentioned anywhere in this instruction. There are no explicit instructions to know your emotions, even though we do know them. When I do the Intro to Meditation course (some of you have taken it), I talk about mindfulness of emotions for an hour and a half in case the people who come have them.

But in the instructions from the Buddha, emotions, in the way we think about them, are not explicit. Maybe the closest the text comes to that is where it says: “When there's a mind with craving, know it as a mind with craving or greed. When there's ill will, know it as a mind with ill will.” Maybe the text gets to emotions a little bit in the fourth foundation, which we'll get to eventually here. But emotions don't really have a place in Buddhism in the same way we think about them. For some people, the emotion in their life is so important it's almost as if they have manifestos about how important emotional expression is.

There is no explicit discussion about thinking in this text. For some people, thinking is where they live. Even if they don't know it, that's where they've taken up residency. Everything is mediated through thoughts, beliefs, ideas, opinions, and memories. If you live based on what has happened to you, even if it was five minutes ago, you are in effect living in the world of thoughts, ideas, and stories. And if you're living in the world of what's going to happen to you in ten minutes, you're also participating in the world of thoughts and ideas. If you're living in the world of your opinions and preferences, likes and dislikes, that has a lot to do with navigating thoughts.

But this text doesn't explicitly give instructions for emotions or thinking. How can that be? Emotions are really big for us. Thinking is really big for us. Were they different than us in ancient India? I suspect not. Was the Buddha kind of oblivious? Or was he living in such exalted spiritual realms that he didn't ever have to think about or be concerned with emotions and thoughts so it didn't occur to him to mention them?

I'd like to propose something different. I'd like to propose that emotions are an important part of human life and we don't want to dismiss them, we don't want to deny them, we don't want to repress them, belittle them, or hide them. I'd like to believe that when we practice mindfulness, every emotion that is happening is allowed to happen. This is one of the best places in the universe to have emotions because we sit here quietly and allow everything to just be within us without denying it, pushing it away, or judging it.

We're not supposed to treat thinking as an enemy when we do mindfulness practice. Ideally, we're not bothered by it or troubled. Ideally, we're not involved with being for or against our thinking. Ideally, we don't invest a lot of importance in our thoughts. At the same time, we don't disinvest, diminish their importance, or bat them away, as if they are wrong or bad – good Buddhists don't have any thoughts; let's stop this nonsense. Certainly, I've had a lot of nonsense of my own in my thinking world. I suspect a few of you have had a little bit of nonsense in that realm, occasionally, maybe accidentally.

Anyway, the Buddha doesn't really address this important issue. But I think he knows we think. There are some places where he gives thinking a lot of respect. In other places, he recognizes thinking can be quite harmful. Thinking can be very beneficial and wondrous, and it can be quite painful and disastrous. So why isn't thinking addressed explicitly in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness? It's a little confusing for Westerners who have been taught that everything has a place in mindfulness but there is no explicit mention of thinking in this important text.

How I interpret it is that these are four areas, ways, or perspectives through which to take a look at anything that's happening to us. Whatever is happening, how is it being experienced physically? Whatever is happening, what's the feeling tone of it? Whatever is happening, what is the mind state like within which it's happening? In the Fourth Foundation, whatever is happening, very simply, what is our relationship to it?

With emotions, you might have stellar, shining, top-of-the-world, let's-write-home emotions. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* doesn't care that they're so great. You might have the worst emotion that anybody's ever had – it couldn't get worse. It doesn't matter whether they're the best or the worst. The instructions are: how do you experience that in your body? What sensations are at play? How is your breathing affected? Where is the tension in your body? Where can you relax?

In mindfulness of posture, how does the emotion affect your posture? Our moods or emotions can have an effect on our posture, and it's fascinating to be attuned to that. What sensations are at play with these emotions? What are the feeling tones of the emotion? Is it pleasant, unpleasant, neither, or both simultaneously? What are the feeling tones? The instructions here are to just know the feeling tones. Just know them, in and of themselves. "Feeling tones in terms of feeling tones" means in terms of themselves – just pleasant – as opposed to, in relation to the person meditating next to you.

("That person is getting all the good stuff. They're getting pleasant feelings all the time. They're smiling. But I'm getting all the painful ones. Boy, I must be doing it wrong, and they're doing it right.") What you don't know is they're re-running old TV shows. But you don't know that, so you just see the smile and you think you know. Here, you're seeing the painful sensations in relation to the other person. You're comparing. The instruction here is: don't compare, although it doesn't say that. It says to just see the feeling tone in terms of itself. If it's painful, or unpleasant, that's what it is. It doesn't need to be compared to anything else. It doesn't need to be part of

some bigger story. If it's pleasant, just know it as pleasant. So the emotion is pleasant. Okay, it's pleasant. Let's feel the pleasant.

Then what's the mind state of the emotion? Is there desire or clinging? Is there aversion? Is there delusion or not? Is the mind free of delusion when this is happening? Is there clarity and space for the emotion just to be there? Or, is there no space and the mind is contracted and tight? Are we spinning out because of the emotion? Know the mind state. Observe the mind state in terms of the mind state – again, without comparing it to what it was like yesterday.

(“Boy, you know, yesterday I was serene and calm, and today I'm agitated because I'm angry at something. Now I'm comparing it to yesterday. Yesterday was a good day. I was on track. Today I'm off track, and I blew it. How did I blow it? Did I eat too much lunch? I knew it. You know, that lunch, I was full, I was stuffed, and I really blew it. I won't get a second chance until tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow at lunch I'll start up fresh. It's just hopeless for the rest of the day. I might as well do the TV reruns.”)

That's not just seeing mind states in terms of mind states. It's seeing them compared to what it was like yesterday, coming to big conclusions, and making the conclusions a source for deciding what to do (give up and start again tomorrow). That is a complicated world, right? The idea is to live in an uncomplicated world of attention, of mindfulness. I'm agitated. The mind is agitated. It's like this, just agitated.

The mind state doesn't have to be seen in relation to anything else – no comparisons. The mind state doesn't even have to be seen in relation to your opinions. You might have the opinion that having an agitated mind is a drag. For the purpose of mindfulness, it doesn't really matter that you have that opinion because you're not tying the agitation to your opinion. It's just seeing, “Oh, this is what an agitated mind is like.”

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness give you a checklist of four different perspectives from which to look upon your experience, whatever it is. This is where anything is allowed. So, if emotions or thoughts are coming up, of course, you'll have them. Maybe it's good to recognize, “Oh, that's the thought,” or, “That's thinking,” or, “That's an emotion.” But then we bring attention to it more carefully to see it in these four separate ways. Sometimes you specialize more in one. You don't have to go through all four.

Sometimes it is enough to just experience it physically. Sometimes it's enough to experience the feeling tone, sometimes the mind state version. How do you know if it's enough? One of the things we're trying to do here is to see things in their radical simplicity, each thing in terms of itself, without comparisons, without a story, without goals, agendas, and histories. Radically, for many of us, we try to see without reference to “me, myself, and mine,” without reference to the way we like to define ourselves, or the way we do define ourselves. We are not using the different things that we're noticing as a source to define ourselves.

If there is anger, physically there's heat and tension. The feeling tone is unpleasant. The mind state might be contracted or agitated. We just feel it that way and are aware of it that way without saying, “I am an angry person.” Often, once we say, “I am an angry person,” for most people that's a magnet for further conclusions and ideas: “I shouldn't be angry. In Buddhist circles, I'm supposed to be always kind and loving. So maybe I won't sit in the hall anymore, because I'm going to pollute the place with my anger.”

Now we're getting kind of complicated ideas that are gathering around the idea of “me, myself, and mine” – how we define ourselves, and how we try not to define ourselves, or prove ourselves, or save ourselves, all kinds of things having to do with “me.” The radical thing about the *Satipaṭṭhāna* is that as we do this personal work – “known personally by the wise” – we're learning how to do it without reference to the selfing that we do.

Of course, we can't stop doing it just like that. The brilliant thing about this approach is that if you do define yourself, if you find yourself thinking in terms of yourself and what it means about who you are, and how other people will see you and define you, it's just one more thing to put through the checklist. What does it feel like physically to have this selfing? "Oh, it feels tight. There's a lot of tension. Look at that. The sensations are a lot of fire" (or rigidity, or who knows).

With feeling tones, if I really pay attention carefully, the movement toward defining myself in any way and asserting myself in any way as a self – as who I am, what I'm supposed to be, and how I'm supposed to be seen – has an unpleasantness to it. It feels like a diminishment. It feels a little hurtful or painful, maybe.

Then the mind state: with a lot of selfing, the mind state can get very tight and small, with very little room to hold things, and very brittle, small, overwhelmed, and stressed. Self-conceptions and ideas are a source of a tremendous amount of stress. There can be all kinds of reactivity. Sometimes the whole self-enterprise we're caught up in can lead us to have a scattered, fragmented, jumping-around mind. The whole world of selfing doesn't really work, so the mind jumps around trying to make it work.

When we see ourselves selfing, there's no crime in that, so it's okay if we do it. But then ask, how is it physically? How is the feeling tone? What's the state of mind? The fascinating thing here is we're looking at the activity of the mind – selfing – without selfing more. We are just seeing it as physical, seeing it as feeling tone, or as a mind state.

We're beginning to untie and disentangle our orientation to see our experience predominantly through the lens of me, myself, and mine. This is very helpful for the purposes of the practice we're doing here. It might not be helpful to win the Miss Universe contest. I think there you probably need a lot more selfing. But that's not what we're here for. What this practice is for is liberation and freedom. This is a radical, amazing possibility that we're all capable of – to release our suffering, release our attachments, and set the heart free.

To do that, it really helps to begin loosening up one of the primary attachments that we have, which is attachment to self. We don't have to believe there is a self. We don't have to believe there is no self. Begin to appreciate how attachment to self limits us, trips us up, and causes a lot of suffering. It puts many of us in a labyrinth. We're looking for the opening to get out, but it turns out this particular labyrinth has no entrance or exit, so once we're in it we can be looking for years and years. But that's not the way out. The only way out of this labyrinth of self that we get caught in is to dissolve the walls of the labyrinth. You can't find a way out, but the walls can dissolve and evaporate. They can not be there.

The important part of this is that these are walls because we've created walls. They are boundaries, they're limits, they're definitions, and they're stories we've lived in. One way to begin letting these walls dissolve and melt away is to start seeing our experience in this radically simple way that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* offers us: see the body just in terms of the body. See the feeling tones just in terms of feeling tones. See mind states just in terms of mind states.

As we get into the third foundation more deeply, there is a transition. Just like there's a transition from the body to the mind in the second foundation, in the fourth foundation, there's a transition between the first four instructions and the second four instructions. This emphasizes a very significant distinction. Remember what I said earlier: that the approach of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* is partly to develop enough clarity to see distinctions. Here the distinctions are first between a mind that has greed and a mind that's free of greed. This is a fantastic distinction to notice. With enough clarity, you can see it even if you have greed. The clarity is one of the places where you can find the absence of greed.

So when there is clarity that sees greed, right there there's freedom from greed. We don't always have to be free of these difficult things. There's a freedom that comes from the clarity of seeing them. The freedom is right there, holding or side by side with difficult mind states. This clarity happens when the mind gets quieter, calmer, more settled, and still, and we are not living in our stories and discursive thoughts so much. Then we start seeing the mind with greed and the mind free of greed; the mind with ill-will and the mind without ill-will; the mind with delusion, and the mind without delusion.

We also see that when the mind is caught up in greed, aversion, or delusion, there are consequences. There's not a free pass. It's not as if this has no impact. Being caught in greed, hatred, or delusion has a huge impact on the inner ecology. There are some ways we can see the impact they have. The text talks about:

a constricted mind or a contracted mind, or a scattered mind, or [I think] a fragmented mind.

When you get caught up in greed, the mind can sometimes get really rigid, hard, constricted, and contracted. Or, sometimes with greed, it's like we're just jumping around, fragmented, and alienated because we're so focused on what we want.

I remember once when I was about 20 and I was hitchhiking, this person picked me up. I don't remember exactly what he asked me – something like, "What are you up to? What are you about?" I had a whole long list of things – spiritual and religious things, and humanistic psychology. I was happily telling him all these things I wanted to do. At some point, he said to me, "You have a lot of desires." That was a little wake-up call. Really? I hadn't noticed. Back then my mind was so scattered and jumping around with all these possibilities.

It is the same way with ill will. Ill will has an impact on the quality of the mind, and we can see it. The text gives these two options: contracted and constricted, versus scattered, distracted, or fragmented. The text gives us a view of the alternative so we can know anything in this way with clarity. To see the mind as contracted without reference to self, without reference to past and future, without reference to preferences, and what we want and don't want, look at this: this is a contracted mind.

Whose contracted mind is it? That's an uninteresting question. Let's not answer it. It's just a contracted mind. We can start seeing it more and more clearly. It might take a while to see it clearly, and that's the exercise here. When we have something strong, like a really high-class contracted mind, we can be so pulled into it that it's hard to even see we're contracted because we're caught in its web.

But as we practice the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, clearly seeing, clearly knowing, clearly feeling it, slowly we begin to make space. Slowly we start to see it. Sometimes it's almost as if we take one or two steps back and look at it from a distance. We give it breathing room. Let's give this contracted mind lots of room. This is the room that awareness creates. Or let's know it clearly. Let's use a few clear mental notes. We can even exaggerate them sometimes. With certain things, it is helpful to exaggerate because it establishes that clarity of separation, as opposed to being glued or stuck in something.

We might say, "Yep, this is a contracted mind." And if that doesn't begin to create some space or some distance from the mind state, then say it in your mind louder, or slower, or more emphatically – "This is *definitely* a contracted mind. No doubt about it." By the time you've said all that, if you really put energy into it and then look at it, I bet you'll start to get some distance. If you don't, then stop doing that.

But the idea is, when we're locked into something, what does it take to start seeing that clearly: "Oh, *this* is what it is." Sometimes it's much easier. There have been times when I didn't know what was going on. I felt kind of odd and out of sorts. Then it finally occurred to me, "Oh, I'm angry." Just knowing that suddenly created space.

"Oh, that's what it is." I was not as lost in it or caught up in it. And it's not a big thing like, "I am angry." It's just, "Oh."

In this act of recognition, there's a clarity, a loosening, and a freeing that goes on. At some point, we start seeing the space around it. In the clarity of knowing, sensing, and observing, we start to see, "Oh, there's another option here. There's also something that is not contracted. There's something here that is not scattered or fragmented."

So there's a transition to start seeing this other possibility for the mind. I think there are very few places in our society where these parts of the mind are taught. In my middle school, they did not teach anything about big mind, the expanded mind, the large mind, or how big the spacious mind can be. I had to be introduced to Zen in order to be taught that.

At some point, it feels as if something like what we call the mind (without needing to define what mind is, please) starts to feel large and spacious. There's lots of space and lots of room, breathing room. The mind can feel expansive. Maybe the mind is coterminous with awareness. The mind (awareness) doesn't stop at the skull. It is not just in the brain, and that's it. Whatever the mind is doesn't stop at the boundaries of the heart. Awareness seems to be broader. It doesn't seem to have any limits. It doesn't seem to have any boundaries. Maybe it fades away a few feet from my head, a few feet from my body, or who knows. Now it feels large and spacious. A calm, settled mind tends to loosen up the contraction and tension that the mind can be living under all the time. So we start freeing the mind from its tension and feeling more space. This is the expanded mind.

Then the instructions are:

When the mind is expanded [when it's large] know it as an expanded mind. When the mind is not expanded, know it as a not expanded mind.

In terms of the checklist of what we can pay attention to, we can ask, "What's the mind state like?" There's greed, ill will, and delusion, and it's contracted. But we can also say it's not expanded. "Oh. It is contracted, but it's not expanded." Maybe just by recognizing it that way, we can see there is another option here: the more *open* mind.

In the suttas, occasionally they talk about the mind becoming open, the mind becoming unconstricted, or uncontracted: large mind. We're well into the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice by the time we get to the third foundation. We have to appreciate that it takes a lot of practice to be able to start getting a clear sense of the mind state to the point that we start to feel some of the freedom of the mind that is not caught in greed, hatred, and delusion, and not contracted.

Then the mind starts to rest in the present moment. The value of resting or abiding in the present moment is partly that it allows the mind to settle, open, gather itself together, and become composed and steadied in a way that it can't in ordinary life. In ordinary life, we're just spinning around in our thoughts and stories and reactivity and preoccupations. Our minds have an amazing capacity for being at peace, settled, whole, and expansive. We can start to feel that this is good, this is special. This is more valuable than the mind I have when I'm doing my taxes (if some of you have done your taxes.) This is a mind that's more valuable than trying to figure out the cheapest possible place to get my oil changed. I think it's possible to find the best place for an oil change with a relaxed and open mind. But if I spend a lot of time searching and investigating the cheapest place for an oil change, I don't think my mind's going to be that expansive. I'm not going to feel like it's a special mind.

There are times when the mind just feels like, "Oh, this is nice." When they get concentrated, settled, and calm, one wonderful way that people sometimes feel is, "Oh, this is a healthy mind." Sometimes they feel, "This is a

birthright." – Really? This comes along with being a human being, just by being born? It is possible to have a mind that feels this healthy, this far out, this wonderful?

This comes after the expanded mind instructions – to feel the expanded mind. The expanded mind gives room for the mind to become whole, gather together, settle, and steady. Then we might feel this is pretty wonderful, but it's possible to feel the onward leading nature of this path. We get a sense, "This is pretty special, but you know there's an inkling, an intuition here that there's actually something even better, something even more ultimate, more supreme."

This is what the Buddha says:

Know an expanded mind as an expanded mind. Know an unexpanded mind as an unexpanded mind. Know a somewhat supreme mind as a somewhat supreme mind. Know the unsurpassable mind [the absolute supreme mind – the mind that cannot be made more supreme] as the [unsurpassable mind] most supreme.

There are a number of distinctions here. There's a distinction between feeling this is pretty special, but there's actually more work to be done. Then at some point, you can't get higher than this with the mind. This is not greed. This is not analysis. This is not searching. This is very simple – knowing the mind state in terms of the mind state, without reference to anything else. But there's a feeling and knowing inside, "Oh, this is good. And there's more."

Next, the text says:

Know a composed mind as a composed mind. Know an uncomposed mind as an uncomposed mind.

I translate the Pali word *samāhita* as "composed." Sometimes it's translated as "concentration" in English – "concentrated mind." The word means something like "steadied," "composed," or "collected." Sometimes it can mean "firm," but firm gives the wrong idea I think in this context. It means "composed," "collected," and "steadied." I like "composed," because "composed" is like gathering together. *Samāhita* is sometimes mentioned together with the word "*ekaggatā*," which can mean "unified."

So this is a composed, unified mind. This is the healthy mind, the mind that feels like, "This is a natural mind." It's a funny thing that when people attain altered states of consciousness like *jhānas* and concentrated states, sometimes it can feel like *this* is the natural mind. This is not an altered state. Looking for a good deal on oil changes is the altered state. It's not altered in a good way. The natural one is this healthy, natural, beautiful mind. It's not under the influence of greed, hate, delusion, and all the complicated machinations of selfing (me, myself, and mine).

So we know a composed mind. The mind is composed, it's steady, it's not rushing off into the past and future and into thought. "Wow, it's here." The mind is content to just be, be present. It is invaluable to come to a time when the mind is not chasing anything, wanting anything, defending anything, or closed down against anything. Right now I'm going to emphasize that this is a mind that's deeply contented. It is a mind that's allowed to have its natural, onward-leading process. It's remarkable that the inner life knows how to find its way if we can get out of the way enough. That means being composed and contented to just allow the mind and heart to be, and trusting it with such a deep trust that we can just rest and steady ourselves.

Then the final distinction is:

To know a liberated mind as a liberated mind and an unliberated mind as an unliberated mind.

We know the mind state in terms of the mind state. If your mind happens to be unliberated someday and you see it, just see it, just know it. Don't make a big deal out of it. That's the beauty of this *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Don't make a big deal out of it. Just the simplicity, the radical simplicity of recognizing, "Oh, today it's an unliberated mind. That's how I feel it. I feel it now."

One day you will feel a liberated mind to some degree: "Oh, look at this. Compared to what it was like yesterday, I'm no longer caught up in X, Y, and Z. I'm liberated from that today. What a difference, to no longer be caught in the hindrances." Even if it's because you got distracted from them, you can feel, "Oh, I'm free temporarily. But don't remind me about them. They'll come pouring back in."

"Oh, a liberated mind. This is what it's like." In Buddhism, it's possible to have the benefits of a liberated mind before we get awakened, before the end of the path. There are various experiences that can lead to a radical feeling that we're freed temporarily from our greed, hatred, and delusion, from our selfing and conceit. But we haven't really been awakened yet. This experience of liberation is temporary. It's more accessible than most people realize. We need to learn to recognize it and see it when it's there. Sometimes it's subtle. Also, you see it in degrees. Remember what I said earlier, that if you see anything clearly, the clarity contains a lot of goodness in it. The clarity contains some quality of liberation, non-clinging, and non-suffering in it.

To move into this area, the third foundation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, it really helps to begin seeing the mind – one of the most personal things about ourselves – impersonally. It helps to see it without conceit, without comparing or building up a story about me and myself and mine with it, and without coming to conclusions (this means that I am XYZ). The odd thing is that as we get more and more personal (it feels good to see how personal this practice is) it simultaneously feels less personal because we don't bring along the tendency to want to define it in personal terms.

Because of its importance, I would like to end by saying that this practice of mindfulness is to be open, present, and recognize whatever is happening in our human experience. Nothing is denied, nothing is outside its realm. But there are useful ways of being present for things. Many of us don't know this, so we're often aware of things and paying attention to things in ways that are not so useful, like trying to get rid of it or trying to figure it out. The suggestion here is that the useful way to go through the four foundations is to ask: given what's happening, what does this feel like in my body? How is it in my breathing? Does my breathing change? Is there tension in my body? Can I relax? What are the sensations here? What are the feeling tones associated with it? What is the mind state? Can you enjoy the way that you attend to the body, the feeling tones, and the mind states? Can you attend, can you pay attention, can you know, can you feel in a way that is peaceful, calm, unassertive, not desperate, not straining and striving?

Can the very manner in which you show up to be present and know be enjoyable and have pleasure in it? Don't overlook the fact that even how you pay attention – how you're mindful, how you know – can be put through the checklist. Doing that is a protection from being mindful in ways that are either too complacent or too assertive. When you find the middle way, maybe you'll start enjoying this whole process more and more. May you trust the process so much that when the time comes, you can trust entering into a world that is so personal that the sense that it's personal drops away and there are no thoughts about personhood in relation to it. Just the moment now. Thank you.