

Saturday Dharma Talk – Entanglement with Sense Experience

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There's a saying that has traveled around in the insight meditation movement (I don't know where it came from or who first said it) that has been meaningful for me, as long as one doesn't try to overapply it: this practice that we do is not about seeing something new but seeing in a new way.

The way this is helpful for me is that I was searching for something fantastic to see and some great thing that was going to fix all my problems – a big bang approach to ending our life difficulties, or just some little kernel of wisdom or some great thing to see – and they lived happily ever after. But I've learned that there's a wonderful wisdom about *how* we see – seeing in a new way so that we're not looking for something. We're not looking out there in the world for an answer. We're not looking for a person who's going to solve all our problems. We're not looking for the perfect teachings that are going to clarify everything. We're not looking for the perfect experience. It has been pointed out that a fair number of people involved in Buddhist practice are experience junkies. They're just looking for the next great experience, going on retreat and collecting experiences that they're going to go back and talk about, like, “Look at what happened to me.”

One of the great things is to discover that we can be present for anything, and look upon anything with eyes that are free. We can look upon anything at all without clinging, without aversion, without delusion, without agitation, without fear. When we have some freedom in that looking, we can look upon anything with a degree of clarity and non-reactivity. We can look upon anything and not appropriate it in any way as me, myself, and mine, our conceit – claiming it for ourselves or claiming that it's not us.

“This is mine” and “This is not mine” are two different movements that are kind of the same. Both are a little bit suspect. This is me. This is not me. This is the self. This is not the self. It's kind of like Buddhism says that, but better than any of that is to not play that game. You can see what's going on without having

to see it through the lens of self and not see it through the lens of not-self. So there's a new way of seeing. It is portable to all our experiences, to all that's happening to us, regardless, at least in principle.

And it applies to being on retreat. There are days on a retreat, hours, and sittings that are not so nice. Things are painful; somehow the mind has decided to have a party; we're at war. Maybe you suddenly discover that you have emotions you never knew you had. Where do they come from? There can be restlessness. There can be peace. There can be anger. There can be happiness. There can be all kinds of things that come and go, and some of them are not to our liking. Sometimes we feel like we've been practicing for a long time and now, at best, we're a beginner. We don't understand this. What are we doing here? And why are we here?

All kinds of things can happen. You can also have, maybe accidentally, a really good sit. You might take credit for it: "Look at me. I'm hot stuff now." In terms of experiences, you have a really good experience. Then there can be a lot of being – "This is mine. This is who I really am". There can be a lot of attachment, a lot of wanting more.

But it's also possible to not have any of that. Difficult experiences are just difficult experiences. We see them in a new way. We see the experience kindly. We see it generously. We see it without appropriating it to a self or relating it to me, myself, and mine. It's just a difficult experience. It must be really difficult for the difficulty. It doesn't have to be difficult for me. It is just something to see. Or, "That's a great experience. Wow. That's nice for the experience." Maybe it's enough to say the experience is having a good time. And we just look at it peacefully.

So we see experience in a new way, no matter what it is. One way of knowing that you're growing in the Dharma is that you can have very difficult experiences and you don't get entangled with or tied up in them. And you can have really good experiences without getting tied up in them. It doesn't mean you're aloof, indifferent, or cold. It just means that these things can live in us in their fullness without bothering us, upsetting us, or being a source of more suffering, more arrows.

In the fourth foundation of mindfulness, there are five sets of instructions. Three of them have to do with how we suffer. And two of them have to do with the process of becoming free of suffering. All of them are part of the developmental model of practice – there's a path that develops as we go along. The part about how we suffer starts with the coarsest and, in theory, the easiest things to deal with. These are the hindrances – the coverings that keep us from seeing clearly or settling deeply. They might be pretty hard to deal with. It might seem a little troubling to hear that they're the easiest to become free of. But still, they're the coarsest. They rely on the shallower attachments for their life, and for their activity. They are expressions or manifestations of the shallower attachments.

Settling and overcoming the hindrances can go together with the growth of the Seven Factors of Awakening. It is really useful and important that some degree of well-being grows as we do this practice. Some sense of well-being comes along with the strengthening of mindfulness and letting go of some of the sources of suffering. In the teachings that the Buddha gives, it should always be remembered that we go further and further along the path in the context of the well-being that's being cultivated and developed called the "Seven Factors of Awakening." The idea is to grow them to fullness: fullness of awareness, fullness of distinguishing experiences, fullness of effort and energy, fullness of joy, tranquility, *samādhī*, and equanimity. I love the idea of fullness because you get to be full of something. Remember that growing these factors is the backdrop.

When you get to the second of these fields of suffering, which is the bundles, the aggregates, these involve a deeper attachment than that of the hindrances. They involve the attachment to self, and that's pretty deep for most people. Here the really important teaching is that the attachment to self is intimately related to the construction of self: how we construct ideas and expectations. The Buddha used the word "expectations" for who we will be in the future. This includes how we conceive or invent who we were in the past and how we make a self up in the present.

The idea of the self is not an innocent thing that we were born with. It is something that develops. It's a magnet for stories, ideas, judgments, opinions, and all kinds of things that come together. These have to do with the five bundles. When we start to see these as being constructed, contingent, and as arising and passing, this begins to loosen up their hegemony and the authority they can have in our lives. Seeing this loosens up the idea that this is the truth, this is fixed, this is who I am, absolutely.

It can be frightening, it can be kind of uninteresting, or it can be an unpleasant idea to hear this. What do you mean, the self is a construct and we're supposed to let go of the constructing? But this makes a lot of sense if we remember the backdrop of the Seven Factors of Awakening. Why wouldn't you let go of the self when the Seven Factors of Awakening are waiting for you, when you can have all this joy and well-being? There's a wonderful feeling of aliveness when we're not cramping up the organic whole, not limiting it, dividing it, resisting it, and doing all the things that selfing does.

Letting go of the ideas and constructs of self doesn't mean we destroy who we are. It means we simply are letting go of the stories that we've made up or received about who we are. We are freeing up something to make more room for the wonderful vitality of the Seven Factors of Awakening to keep growing. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the key to this is to see the constructs of self as something that arises and passes. When you see them as constructs rather than as things, it's easier to see their arising and passing.

For instance, with the first aggregate, sometimes people say it's the body. But I check in regularly and sometimes I hold on tight, and it's not coming and going – it's here. But the first aggregate has to do with the ideas of my body, my projections on it, the things that I select out of my body – the appearances and characteristics that are important. My hairline is important. (I hope none of you are going to the mirror to look at yours. That messed you up.) The hairline doesn't change so much in the mind. I can still do the measurement, so the distance between my nose and my hair didn't come and go and hasn't changed.

But what I see coming and going is my thinking and concern about hairlines, the construct of how I appear. That comes and goes. For me, I think the self-image of my appearance is usually I don't know how many years behind reality. I'm slow to catch up as my body's changing. I carry an image that's left over from before and sometimes I'm surprised. So I have ideas about appearances, and these come and go. We can see they come and go. We can start seeing, "Oh, they're the ideas, the constructs – that's what they are."

So much of the attachment to self is oriented around those constructs and ideas. To begin letting go of both the constructs and also the attachments to self is phenomenal. It is not easy, but it's possible. Rather than this letting go being all or nothing, I think most of us probably see it as loosening up and diminishing over time. Seeing the bundles is the second exercise. In the teachings of the Buddha, when that's done well, it leads to a certain degree of spiritual maturity. Sometimes it leads to stream entry, entering the stream.

The next level is seeing a different form of attachment, which in English is usually called the "fetters." But in my working vocabulary outside of Buddhism, I don't think I ever use the word "fetter." The Pali word literally means "knot." So I think of this as knots – some of us can get all knotted up. I also like to call it "tied up," like the way we get tied to things. We say in English, "I was all tied to something."

The third exercise has to do with something really simple in relation to how we get tied up or knotted up. The sense of self is no longer an issue. The hindrances are no longer an issue. We're no longer constructing the idea of self. What's left? What's left now is the simplest form of sense experience. The eyes see sight objects. The ears hear sound objects. The nose smells smell objects. The tongue tastes taste objects. The body touches tactile objects.

There is the eye, there's the object out there, and there's the eye-consciousness that is stimulated with the contact of all three of these. That's fine. And then there's the entanglement with it, the knot. For example, here there is the bell. There's me looking at the bell. In between the two is the veil – all the ways I'm tied to this bell. I might think this is a great bell, and I should probably take this home with me because my meditation will be so much better. I might wonder how I can convince the folks here to let me take it

home. They probably won't miss it. Now I'm entangled, I'm knotted up. There are all kinds of ways I could be knotted up around something like a bell or anything at all.

It's like we're going about our business, being alive, seeing things, being in the world, and then suddenly we get involved with something. We see something, and somehow we get caught by it. So I'm caught by the bell. As soon as I'm caught by the bell and start thinking about the bell, my attention is not fluid anymore. It's not in harmony, it's not attuned to the changing, flowing nature of the situation. My consciousness, my awareness, and my sense of presence don't keep flowing with how things are going. I'm now locked into the bell: "Okay, this is what it's all about."

This is called a fetter or a knot – getting tied up. This is the third and final frontier for this practice that we're doing. First came the hindrances, then the constructs of self. It is really nice to have those settle down because then there's very little left. Experience has gotten really simple: there's a sense experience, and there is being tied into or locked onto it, or not. Having some sense of the Four Noble Truths, as they were described in the text, helps us to start recognizing these knots. Seeing the arising and passing of phenomena allows us to see when we no longer see the arising and passing, because now what has arisen is being locked on and is caught in something. Then we have left the flow of things coming and going.

As practice deepens, and the peace, calm, and well-being become stronger, there's not a lot of activity of the mind anymore. There's not a lot of thinking and selfing going on. But there's still sense contact. We hear a sound, or feel a body sensation, or see something with the eyes. There can still be attachments operating there. The Buddha calls the experience of the six sense doors "the all." There are various ways he describes this, but this is one of the ways he describes the whole realm of our experience. Everything in direct experience comes through one of these six senses doors – the eye, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind door.

Because of the ability to perceive what's going on in the mind, it's almost as if we have a sense door there that can see and know. Aside from these six doors, you won't know anything. Everything has to come through these doors. Any thought, anything that goes on in your mind that you become conscious of, has to go through the sense door of the mind that sees it and knows it. So there are only six possible places to stand and watch. Everything will come in this way. Based on these six different areas where things come in, we take the data in and we build amazing worlds of fantasy. We build senses of self and all the constructs. So that's the all.

There's a somewhat famous *sutta* called *The Fire Sermon*. It's said to be the third discourse the Buddha gave when he started teaching. I once saw a book called something like *The Hundred Greatest Speeches*

of All Times. This speech was in there. I think a really good orator with a big Shakespearean voice can probably make this impactful. Remember, they use the word “all” here. It goes like this:

All is burning. And what is all that is burning? The eye is burning. Forms are burning. Eye consciousness burning. Eye contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises with eye contact as a condition, whether pleasant or painful, neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging, and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say. The air is burning. The eyes are burning. The ears are burning. The nose is burning. The tongue is burning. The body is burning. The mind is burning. All of them are burning. [There's a lot of repetition of “burning, burning.” That makes for a nice rhetorical speech, I guess.] Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, the fire of hatred, and the fire of delusion. Seeing this, the well-instructed disciple of the Buddha becomes disenchanted with the eye, with the ear, with the nose, with sight objects, with hearing objects, with the contact, and with the feelings that arise from them.

I love the word “disenchanted” because it means that you get disenchanted once you're already enchanted. Enchanted means you're caught, you've been knotted up. Enchantment is a little bit of a delusion, a little bit like you're investing way too much importance in the phenomena. To no longer be enchanted, no longer invest so much in phenomena. If there's lust, there's a big investment. If there's hatred, there's a big investment. If there's delusion, there's a big investment and involvement. Maybe in the modern economic world we live in, rather than disenchantment, we should say “disinvestment” – we're withdrawing our investment.

There are many teachings where the Buddha goes through the sense doors systematically and says that all of them are inconstant, changing, suffering, and not self. I spent decades wondering, what does this mean, that all the sense experiences are suffering? Most of the explanations I get are unsatisfying, including the one that says that *dukkha* (suffering) means dissatisfaction. I think that the *sutta* I just read, *The Fire Sermon*, is the key to understanding this. It says that all these things are burning and that is suffering. And what are they burning with? With the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion.

The statement that all the sense doors (the eye, etc) are suffering is not meant to be taken literally. The eye is not literally burning. But it is burning with the fever of greed, for example. This does not literally mean that all these are suffering. It is saying that they're suffering when there is craving, when we get involved in that way. That craving and involvement are often very much tied to self and taking things personally. Realizing that these things are not self, no longer investing in self or defining a self through

sense contact, is a dramatic way to loosen up the fires, the burning, and the weight involved with sense contact.

So we sit here quietly. At some point in mindfulness practice, we're concentrated, quiet, and still, and we're not projecting or caught up in our thoughts. Now things are really simple, maybe finally, for a while, we are just in the present, with our moment-to-moment experience, and what's flowing through is sense experience. If you're centered on your breathing, you might feel the ripple, the kaleidoscope of sensations that come into play with one inhale. If you try to track it, there can easily be a half dozen different sensations from the beginning of an inhale to the end of the inhale. You don't have to chase each one.

When I first started doing vipassana retreats, I used to try to see how many sensations I could see on an in-breath and out-breath. I didn't try to do it all at once, on one in-breath. As different cycles of breathing went around, I would say, "Oh, there's another one. There's another one." Then I would just wordlessly watch the ripples, "Look at all that. All is coming and going, coming and going." Because the mind was resting in the experience, not doing anything with the experience, not appropriating it for self, it got really concentrated just by watching the ripples of one inhale and one exhale.

This can be more of an open awareness practice, where the sensations are coming from anywhere reality wants them to come from – sometimes sounds, sometimes smells, sometimes body sensations, sometimes the mind. Some people find it really wonderful to do hearing meditation – just listening. Because there we have the sense of sounds coming into the ear. But often that's not a place people feel they are controlling. With breathing, there can be all kinds of issues of control, and "me," and striving and pushing and making something happen. Whereas with sounds, it's easier to let go, just trust and allow, and just rest in the sounds that come and go, almost like with music.

Since there's usually some distance from ourselves with sounds, some people have a sense that it is almost as if their sense door of hearing spreads out and becomes expansive and wide, as if it reaches out to where the sounds are coming from. It's a very nice feeling, being with just the sounds coming and going. They can be very pleasant and relaxing – until we lock on and get tied up: "That's a wonderful chime. I should have one in my home." Maybe that's innocent enough, but if there's one more sentence, like, "How do I get it? And how do I sneak onto my phone to go to Amazon and order it so it's at home when I get home?" Now there's a fetter operating. Now you've been caught and knotted up.

When things get quiet enough and simple enough, it feels so good to not be knotted up and not create a self out of anything – to just rest with and allow for the wonderful flow of the ripples of sensation. Things at the sensation level are at a deeper level than the hindrances and a deeper level than constructs of self. It

has gotten very simple. But there is still a little pull, a little resistance, a liking or not liking going on – being for some things and against other things.

Now the instruction is to see the arising of that knot – to see the beginning of reaching out, getting involved, and picking it up. Then the instruction is to see the abandoning of it. I interpret this to mean the deep wisdom of saying, "Nope, I'm not going to do that again. I've gotten caught up in so much sense experience over my lifetime that I think there's a better thing to do right now. The peace, well-being, clarity, and settledness I have are so much better than getting tied up in this thing one more time." This is not a should, and it's not an obligation, but rather, you know something really good is happening. And you feel that in the knotting up, something is diminished, something is lost, and there is suffering. So you think, "No – enough. I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm not going to do it."

Sometimes when the mind gets really still, really quiet, it can seem that any sense experience coming in is a disturbance for the mind. Then the Buddha's idea that all sense experiences are *dukkha*, or suffering, has a new twist: anything is too much. We are all becoming hypersensitive. So learning to be patient with that, and practice with that is part of the game.

So why do we do this? Why do we want to hang out this way with our sense experience, and, get so simple and quiet? I think one reason is so we don't suffer so much. But more importantly, we do this in order to really get down there to the root attachment, the root craving that we have, and create the conditions where the mind can let go in a deep way. It can't let go if there's agitation. It can't let go if things are knotted up. It can't let go if we're caught up in ideas of self.

There has to be a profound space and a settledness in the heart and the mind for the sense of trust, safety, or equanimity to spread down deeply enough into our depths for something to let go and release. So that we really know what freedom is like. We really know what the absence of suffering is like. And that becomes the teacher. That then becomes the guide for how we can live our lives with more freedom.

So here's a story. I think it's a little bit of a mythic story – lore of the ancient teachers. It concerns a monk named Upasena:

Now on that occasion, a viper had fallen on Venerable Upasena's body and bit him. Then the Venerable Upasena addressed the other monks, "Come friends, lift this body of mine onto the bed and carry it outside before it is scattered right here like a handful of chaff." [He's been bitten by a viper and he knows he's going to die. He doesn't want to leave a mess, so he says, "Take me outside."]

Venerable Sariputta said to Venerable Upasena, "We do not see any alteration in your body nor any change in your faculties. Yet you say, 'Come friends, lift this body of mine onto the bed and carry it outside before it is scattered right here like a handful of chaff.'" [He's been bitten by a viper, and he knows he's going to die, I guess. But he's unconcerned. He hasn't gotten nervous or afraid and he hasn't been altered in any way. He's still at ease and peaceful, enough to get Sariputta's attention. He just mentions it, "Well, look, that's kind of amazing. You're calm through all this."] And then Uppasena says:

Friend Sariputta, for one who thinks "I am the eye; the eye is mine; I am the ear; the ear is mine; I am the nose; the nose is mine; I am the tongue; the tongue is mine; I am the body; the body is mine; I am the mind; the mind is mine," there might be alteration of the body or change of the faculties.

[In other words, you might get upset or agitated.]

But, friend Sariputta, it does not occur to me, "I am the eye; the eye is mine; I am the ear; the ear is mine... and so forth... I am the mind, and the mind is mine." So why should there be any alteration in my body or any change in my faculties? [Since I don't take any of these things to be me, myself, why should I be concerned?]

That's pretty chilled. Imagine, what is it going to take for you to be like Uppasena on your deathbed? That day will come. It might be a sudden death. But what if it was slow enough that you could call your friends in and say, "Guess what? I'm about to die," and they'd say, "Wow, you seem pretty calm." I have known people who were dying, and friends and Sangha members at IMC flocked to see them because they were so at ease, so equanimous, and so peaceful. It was kind of like going for *Darshan*. It was like going to be with a teacher. These are people who hadn't been so calm in their lives, but somehow as they approached their death, they were peaceful. It was a phenomenal gift to those of us who got to sit with them.

So what about you? Will you have an alteration, meaning will your skin color change, will tension build up, will you go pale and be afraid – "Look, I'm dying." Will you be agitated? Or is it possible you'll discover how to die peacefully? It is possible. It's possible to realize that a lot of the things you're tied up in are no longer relevant in those last days and minutes.

Are you going to be feeling regret about the Netflix movie you didn't watch during your last minutes of life? Is that what you're going to spend your time with? Will you spend the last minutes of your life thinking about recipes you didn't get to cook? I think it's a very precious time. It's natural to let go, to let go fully. It's not a time to have regrets. It's not a time to want it to be different. You're missing an opportunity to step

into being alive in a full way, without anything in the way. That's what happens for some people. When they get close to dying, they drop so much, and there's a fullness and peace in their presence. Upasena's ticket to doing that was he did not think that "I am the eye, I am the ear, I am the nose," or that "The eye is mine. It's my body."

We have such a strong cultural orientation that says, "The body is mine, this is who I am." There's some appropriateness to that, but it reinforces a strong attachment. It is possible that only when they're dying do some people finally let go of their attachment to all kinds of things. Buddhism helps us to do that earlier. It's a preparation of sorts – a preparation to be fully alive now and to be fully alive as we die.

This teaching about the sense bases, really getting to the bottom and watching how we latch on – how when we're in the river, we grab hold of a tree branch overhanging the water and hold on for dear life. Or we take a bucket of water out of the river and think we have the river, but we're no longer in the river of the moment-to-moment flow of sense experience. We are no longer resting in the river of experience that is not being constructed, held onto, or pushed away.

Upasena says that he no longer is claiming any of this is me or mine. Sariputta then says:

It must be because I-making and mine-making and their underlying tendency to conceit had been thoroughly uprooted in venerable Upasena for a long time, so that it has not occurred to him that "I am the eye, the eye is mine, I am the ear, the ear is mine," and so forth. Then Upasena died, and the bhikkhus lifted the venerable Upasena's body onto the bed and carried it outside. Then the venerable Upasena's body was scattered right there just like a handful of chaff.

That's the mythic part of the story. I think the reason they came up with this idea is that at some point in later *Theravāda* Buddhism (some of these *suttas* were probably composed after the time of the Buddha) there was the idea that everything that we are is the five bundles. Since the five bundles are all products of attachment, we don't really become free of all the bundles until we're dead. But when we die, the bundles untie and scatter like chaff in the wind, never to come back again, never to be reborn again.

You're all very sophisticated. But when practice gets deep, full, or mature, when you're well cooked in practice, a lot of the sophistication falls away and things become really simple, amazingly simple: just the moment of sense contact, one contact after another. Each sense contact is seen as coming and going, arising and passing. If you get close to it, no sense contact will stay fixed for very long. It's all little sparks. It's fascinating to go and feel pain. If you get really close and intimate with the pain, you can feel it sometimes as little sparks, a little dance of sensations that are coming and going quickly within a little

square centimeter of your knee. Look at that. Sometimes when people dip down really close in, they realize that the idea of pain falls away because pain is, believe it or not, a kind of abstraction for the intensity of particular sensations. Going down and really feeling those sensations is not an easy thing to do. The important aspect of that is to really drop down so deeply that the experience is no longer being filtered through the usual idea, "This is happening to me."

I remember having tremendous self-pity when I had burning knee pain when I was a Zen student. We weren't allowed to move, so it was essential for me not to have self-pity. The only way I could survive was to not have self-pity. I saw that if I had self-pity, the micro muscles tightened up around the knee pain. When I stopped having self-pity, those micro muscles probably relaxed. That very slight difference made all the difference to managing or not managing the pain.

When we tie it to the self, the whole sense world becomes much more complicated and difficult. We need to be able to be free of conceit, free of tying it to me, myself, and mine, free from claiming it's about me, it's my thing. It's quite counter-intuitive for many people to do this. Sometimes even the suggestion that we get out of the way with our me, myself, and I constructs seems offensive. But it becomes kind of clear that once there is a lot of settling and a lot of letting go, and the constructions of the aggregates have stopped, we have dropped down into a very deep place.

This is not something you have to talk yourself into; it's just obvious: "Look at that. If I get knotted up around this as me, myself, and mine, it's so much more difficult. If I get me, myself and mine out of the way and just allow the sensations to move through, it's so much easier." Then to allow all the sensations, the pleasant, the unpleasant, the neither pleasant nor unpleasant, to just flow through peacefully, not related or caught in the sticky web of self, is so much easier. It's a wonderful preparation for living a free life, even if these are your last minutes alive.

I think one of the consequences of my years of practice in the realm of teaching is that I have a very positive view of what's possible in the last minutes of life. Hopefully, dying is not too difficult. Sometimes it's very difficult and painful, or there's not much consciousness to experience it. But if I can experience it with my ordinary consciousness, I think it's going to be amazing. Some of the deeper experiences I've had in meditation are kind of like dying, and they are so fantastic. I don't know what happens on the other side of dying, but being present in those last moments is fantastic. And just like I wouldn't be worried about whether I bought enough bread in the last few minutes before I died, I wouldn't be worried about what happens on the other side of death, because that takes you out of the moment of that experience.

In some ways every moment, all the time, can be that simple. The more simply you can be here for this experience, the closer you'll be to getting a taste of freedom, and the more you'll be prepared for so much that's coming in your life, not just death. So staying close:

In the seen, just the seen; in the heard, just the heard; in the sensed, just the sensed; in the cognized, just the cognized.

It is that simple. Thank you.