

Monday Dharma Talk – Undoing and No Doing

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A lot of Dharma practice is undoing – not doing. The hindrances are a lot of doing. We're doing something; we're engaged. The mind is quite active when the hindrances are active, especially when you realize how much thinking usually comes along. Having desires is exhausting. Wanting, planning, and expecting are disappointing. Having ill will is also exhausting. The energy of anger, with the self-righteousness and the power that can come along, can be kind of fun sometimes. People have their own ideas of a good time. But it's exhausting. A lot of effort and energy go into anger.

It goes without saying that sloth and torpor (or rigidity and lethargy) are tiring. But sloth and torpor are activities. They are not simply tiredness. There's some activity going on, some doing that's bringing them about. Restlessness, worry, regrets, and remorse also involve a lot of energy. Doubt can also be exhausting, with all the doing, thinking, wondering, and indecisiveness.

Appreciate that a lot of doing goes into the hindrances. There is a lot of thinking, which is usually built on the edifice or idea of self. That idea of self, in terms of clinging to any of aggregates as self, is also a construction. It's a doing. These heaps, these bundles are not only constructed, but then effort has to be made to accumulate them, gather them, and bundle them up together.

We know that sometimes the attachment to ideas of who we are wants to be reinforced. People want to get praised, they want to get recognized. They want to prove themselves – "Look who I am." This whole self-enterprise is a lot of work. There's another kind of self-project, which is to be shy, self-effacing, and withdrawn, and that's a lot of work too. It's also a doing.

So there's an undoing. There's a quieting of the thinking mind that drives the hindrances. There's a deconstruction of the house of cards that we have created around the self. Then there's the untying of the knots. I guess there's a bit of doing in untying. Some knots are complicated and difficult to untie. And sometimes the Dharma is a wonderful sword that cuts through the Gordian knot. You don't always have to untie them. The Dharma is a lot about not doing. For many people, you won't go wrong in meditation practice if you sit aware, with enough doing to stay present and aware, cognizant of what's happening here and now, and don't do anything else. That begins to pull the rug from underneath a lot of the doing.

This is one of the reasons why it has been said that if it's not simple, it's not *vipassanā* – simple mindfulness, simple awareness, which can allow an undoing, a deconstruction, an untying and dissolving of the knots. It's pretty radical to do very little or nothing. It can seem like, how are you going to get ahead if you do nothing? How are you going to make a difference? How are you going to get better? How are you going to get happy? Because we've gotten the message that it's only by doing and advancing that we're going to get somewhere.

But this is a little bit like we have to do something because we have a scab and we don't know what to do except scratch the scab. We just keep pulling it off because we have to do. Don't do that. Leave it alone so it can heal. Or your shoulders are really tense from all the doing, and that's a problem; they hurt. So you've got to get busy to address the tense shoulders. Then you get really tense because you've got to do something about it. You don't undo tension by bringing more tension. You can't undo all the constructs of self by constructing a new construct (I'm the meditator who's going to destroy the self). All the habits of many of us to keep doing and find something to do and think we have to do can be so convincing. It can be so impossible to understand the benefits of not doing – not going into a coma, but not doing while aware.

That's the really important ingredient: you have to be aware. The capacity to be really present here develops into lucid awareness. This is like turning on the light. Now there's, everything is seen within the clarity of the mind. So there is a cultivation and development of clarity. But beyond that, there doesn't have to be a lot of doing.

At the beginning of the retreat, I talked about refuge. I referred to the famous passage at the end of the Buddha's life where he said, "Be a refuge unto yourself." Then he said, "Be a refuge with no other refuge." Then he followed that immediately with almost the same phrase. He said, "Make the Dharma your refuge and have no other refuge." The word he used for "self" in "make yourself" was just the word "*atta*" – this famous word that Buddhism is not supposed to believe in.

Here, at the end of his life, he used that great word "*atta*" (self) and said to take refuge in it. I guess he was slipping in his old age. Old habits crept in. But then he goes on to say what he means – what refuge in self and refuge in *Dhamma* are. He says it's the Four Foundations for Awareness, the four ways of cultivating lucid awareness. So there is something to do, but it's not a project of constructing something or making something happen in the ordinary meaning of the word "make." It is about cultivating, growing, and bringing forth our capacity to be aware. He says that you do this through the Four Foundations of Mindfulness – the practices I've been teaching in this retreat.

The reason I wanted to highlight this is that the practices of knowing, feeling, sensing the body, and relaxing – all the practices of *satipaṭṭhāna* – are actions we do, activities of the mind. They're not fixed things. There's no belief that, "Okay, I'm going to do this mindfulness practice. But I'm just going to find it inside me. I'm going to be really still and see where it is."

You won't see it. There has to be some doing – "Oh, there's an in-breath. There's an out-breath. There I'm feeling my whole body. This is the experience of the whole body. This is tension in the body, and here's relaxing it." It's a kind of doing. It's an activity that can only be seen if you're doing it. It has no permanence. It has no essential element of who we are unless there's an activity.

When the Buddha said, "Make yourself be a refuge unto yourself," how do you do that? By taking refuge in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness – in an activity, not an essence, not a construct of self, not a belief in a soul or some essential thing (this is who I really am). The Buddha used nouns to represent what people do, the activities that they were engaged in. A farmer farms; a cook cooks. A farmer farms when the farmer is farming. A cook cooks when they're cooking, but otherwise, are they really a cook?

We have roles and activities we do, and that's how the Buddha wanted to see and evaluate people. Are we living by the Precepts or not living by the Precepts? That was really meaningful for the Buddha. Whether or not a person was born into some caste was kind of irrelevant to him. He said, "No matter what your caste is, people can live by the Precepts or not live by them. They can have loving kindness or not have loving kindness. They're all equal that way." So for the Buddha, the activities are what's really important. In practice, the activity that we take refuge in is the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

I say all this because there is a very positive view of self in the *suttas*. But it's not the same self, the *atta*, that people in other religions of his time were holding up as the soul, the essence, the permanent, abiding, transcendent core inside of us that one had to understand and realize. It was complicated. They also said you couldn't know it, but you had to be it, or realize it, and maybe believe in it.

That's when the Buddha said there's no self. There is no reified idea of a thing that just exists by itself. We reify when we create all kinds of identities for ourselves, such as, "I'm a lousy meditator, that's who I am." Why hold on to that fixed idea? When you're having supper, you're not meditating, so why bother being a lousy meditator when you're not meditating? When you're eating, you're an eater. When you're drinking, you're a drinker. When you're sitting, you're a sitter. When you're sitting and meditating, and your mind wanders off in thought, you're a distracted meditator. That's all. There is no need to make any claim, "I'm a lousy meditator."

With that idea, we're constructing something, making something fixed, and holding onto it. Then we carry it around with us when we're eating and drinking. It can be a big drag to keep doing that same activity and remembering it, "Yeah, I'm a lousy meditator. The other people are good, but I'm not. I'm a lousy one." Not only is it exhausting, but it's depressing. But you're eating. What you are is an eater. Just be content with what you're doing. Why drag the past with you? Why come up with these constructs that you carry around like baggage? That's the bundling. That's the accumulating of constructs. Some of us accumulate and carry a lot of baggage consisting of ideas of who we are for years and years. But those are all doings that we can settle and quiet.

There is a real appreciation for a certain way of understanding the self in the Buddha's teaching. He spoke about the self very positively in his teaching about human beings and who we are. There is a lot of warmth and appreciation of our potential, our capacity for finding the end of suffering, and our capacity to care and have compassion and love. This can easily get forgotten if the teacher says, "Let go. Let go, let go, let go of everything." That can seem frightening and disturbing as if it negates everything about who we are.

But what if there's a fantastic thing waiting for you if you let go: there's beauty. There are capacities for refuge, wisdom, intelligence, intuition, equanimity, and generosity. There are all kinds of things waiting that letting go fully doesn't negate. In a sense, we're letting go of what's not true. We're letting go of the forces inside of us of clinging and holding on that cause suffering. This provides the context for the Venerable Ananda to approach the Blessed One and say to him:

Venerable Sir, it is said, "Empty is the world. Empty is the world." In what way, Venerable Sir, is it said, "Empty is the world?"

It is, Ananda, because it is empty of self and what belongs to self that it is said, "Empty is the world." And what is empty of self and what belongs to the self? The eye, Ananda is empty of the self and what belongs to the self. Appearances are empty of self and what belongs to self. Eye consciousness, eye cognition is empty of self and what belongs to self. Eye contact is empty of self and what belongs to self.

Then it goes on to include all the different sense bases. *It is, Ananda, because it is empty of self and what belongs to self that it is said, "Empty is the world."* So the eyes don't contain the self. But the eyes function, they work. Attributing a self to the eyes is to construct something and put it on top. But what are the eyes? Since the eyes are looking, they are lookers. They are seers. But we don't have to attribute a self there. That is easy enough for people like me with all kinds of funny vision issues. When I first got glasses, I was in fourth grade. I got the glasses just before I moved to a new school. I moved to new schools frequently – I think 12 times in 12 years. Well, sometimes I went back to the same school. Anyway, when I showed up at the new school, I didn't bring my glasses. I didn't want to bring them out because my self-identity, who I was, and my fear of being teased were tied up to having glasses.

Some people can feel as if they are inadequate if they don't see well. They feel something is wrong with them as a person, so they are defining themselves by their glasses, and by their sight. Defining ourselves by these things is an activity, a doing that can cause so much pain and suffering. Is it necessary?

When the Buddha says the eye is empty of self, it's actually a statement of liberation. It's a statement of freedom. "Oh, I don't have to do that. I don't have to build a self around it or look for a self or attribute a self. And what happens then? Then, in the seen, there is just the seen. If you have poor eyesight like mine, then in the seen, just the seen, in the muddled seen, in the blurry seen, there is just the blurry seen. Sometimes it's fun. This eye sees objects bigger than this eye. Somehow my brain has to put these two things together to make a single thing. It's kind of fun. Having vision like this is neither me nor not me. I don't make a self out of it. I don't define myself by it. I go to the eye doctor.

So in the seen, just the seen, in the heard, just the heard, as opposed to attributing a self to this whole seeing apparatus with all the steps that go into making seeing. When I've done selfing with the seeing world – somehow I'm a self who's seeing or I'm looking at something that is supposed to be myself – I've noticed that I can feel the tension in my eyes. The eyes start staring or locking up.

In the seen, there is just the seen. And this world is empty of self. That is a teaching that was given several times. For example: There was a king. His name was Mogharaja. It might be a made-up story because the word "*mogha*" means empty, but not the same as *sunyata* (empty). It means kind of "vain," not a good emptiness. Basically, he was called the "king of vanity," or "the vacuous king, the void king." So King Empty came to the Buddha and said:

I've come seeking a question. How do I look upon the world so the king of death won't see me?

[It was like asking how do I see death so I won't be found by the Grim Reaper?] The Buddha answered:

Look upon the world as empty, King Mogha... [But here "empty" is *sunyata*, the great emptiness of the Buddhists.]

Look upon the world as empty, King Mogha, ever mindful, having uprooted the view of self, the opinion of self, the philosophy of self, the doctrine of self, the story of self. You may thus cross over death.

[*Mogharaja-manava-puccha: Mogharaja's Question, Sn 5.15*]

That's how to look upon the world so the king of death won't see you. When he says, "cross over death," the Buddha doesn't mean he's going to live forever. I think to "cross over death" means to be no longer bothered by it, no longer concerned, no longer afraid, no longer defined by it, no longer living in a world where one is attached to life, attached to death, or attached to what happens afterward. One is free in relation to death.

Yesterday I told the story of *Malunkya*, where the Buddha said:

When for you there's only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then you are not with that.

In other words, when seeing is only seeing, there's no attribution of self in that. We're not putting ourselves in it. We're not making a self out of that. It's just the seeing. When hearing is just the hearing, that's very simple. There is nothing to do and nothing to make – just hear. In the sensed, just the sensed, and in the cognized, just the cognized. When you are not with that – when you don't find yourself or define yourself there among those things, you aren't in them. You're not there. When you are not there, you are not here. Nor are you beyond here and there. Nor are you in between here and there. Because you're not defining yourself anywhere.

It's interesting to practice mindfulness and to have this heightened sensitivity. Of course, there's a lot of self-ing going on. It's very subtle. Some people identify very strongly with their thinking. That's who they are. Some people identify with consciousness, with their awareness. Some people identify with the doer, the one who's doing the mindfulness, doing the practice.

It is interesting to bring mindfulness to this – to sense, feel, and observe the experience of having a self. It's not uncommon to feel that there's a locus, a place where the self resides. That may be the place where we think. Some people think in the middle of their skull or behind the forehead. Or the self might be in the emotions, maybe at the center of the chest. Sometimes it's in the eyes. Some people are very visually oriented, looking and trying to see.

The self can be felt as tension, as pressure, and like a denseness coming together and being compact someplace. It's not surprising that in some of the religions of the Buddha's time, they believed the *atta* was a very tiny little rice kernel-size thing inside somewhere. Maybe some of them felt a little piece of tension and denseness was coagulated there.

But all those things are products of doing and selfing. When we look at it and see it relax, then there's no place for that tension and denseness anymore. Then, where am I? Am I over there? Am I here? Am I in between the two? Am I somehow now transcended? All those answers are completely irrelevant. You don't need to answer the question of where you are. Just let the activities of life be lived – in the seen, just seeing; in the hearing, just hearing; in eating, just eating; in speaking, just speaking; in walking, just walking.

There doesn't have to be a self that has a location, that has been gathered together, that has accumulated and gathered all the bundles of ideas about ourselves that are coming along for the ride. There's the undoing of all that. Then there is a radical simplicity that doesn't negate the human functioning that we are. That simplicity negates the latching on, the bundling up, the constructions, and the attachments that we have. In a sense, all we're doing is letting go of the attachments. I think this is phenomenally generous to us because then we get to be ourselves.

(And hopefully, other people cooperate. That makes it a little complicated. But that's where we have to have some street smarts.) But when we're with ourselves, minding our own business, sitting and meditating, we're allowed to just be fully who we are in a particular way, where there are no attachments, there are no constructs, there's nothing to prove, there's nothing to be, there's nothing to attain. We can get out of the way in such a way that we can be ourselves, but there's no pressure. There's no pressure coming from attachments. There's no pressure coming from defining ourselves by our desires and aversions.

There might be aversion or desires, but because they have no locus, they have no self. In this open, clear mind, it is possible to see desire as desire. Desire is just desire. It doesn't have to be picked up. It doesn't have to be undone. It can just be allowed to self-liberate – poof! – if it's left alone and seen clearly.

After the teachings to *Malunkyaputta*, the Buddha continues with a poem. Here he's talking about *rupa*, the first aggregate, and the first of the sight objects for the eye, which I translate as “appearances.” I like to translate it as appearances for several reasons. One, because it makes it clear that we're not innocent onlookers. We take in sense data, and that gets processed in our brain, and then we send out, metaphorically, our projections onto the world. When we reconstruct it in the brain, what we see out there is not the pure sense data that came in. What we see is through the filter of how it has been reconstructed in our heads.

I'm always confused when I see the drawings in biology books where they claim that when images come into our eyes, they are all upside down. What? I don't see it upside down. But somehow it's upside down, and then it gets reconstructed to be right-side up again. This is just like my two eyes that have to figure out how to

harmonize. If I go back and forth, closing one eye, and then the other, things jump back and forth in two sizes. But somehow the brain figures out how to reconstruct the image. But the reconstruction also has to do with our preferences, our attachments, and our desires. So appearances are not just how things are, but how they appear to us. How they appear to us has something to do with what we are interested in.

There's a Pali word – *nimitta*, which in this context means “the signifying characteristic” that our eyes will see and recognize as the thing. If you're looking for a good partner, you probably have a few signifying characteristics you're looking for, maybe unconsciously, and that you like in another person. You don't just take a neutral look at everyone.

So here is the poem:

*Having seen appearances with confused awareness,
contemplating the pleasing characteristics of the appearances,
one remains clinging to it and experiences an infatuated mind.
Many feelings are born from that appearance, such as covetousness and annoyance, which injure the mind.*

[I just love this line – if we're covetous or annoyed, we're injuring ourselves, or at least, our mind.]

*And one thereby accumulates suffering and is far from nibbāna [from becoming free].
In contrast, having seen appearances with lucid awareness,
one is not infatuated by appearances, one does not experience an infatuated mind.
Seeing like this, one does not cling to the appearances.
Being aware like this, suffering doesn't accumulate.
Instead, it drains away. And then one is near nibbāna. [Near to freedom, becoming free.]*

This describes the accumulating of suffering. The more we bundle up the constructions with attachment, the more we suffer. Some self-concepts are just like (as someone called them) minefields. (I can't quite remember whether the person said “mine-” or “mind-”. We create so much suffering. Unfortunately, it's not only our doing. It's reinforced by or received from others, and we don't know any better way, so we adopt the suffering, take it on, and live with it.

What I like about this sentence “it drains away” is that the Pali word can also mean “it exhausts itself.” It runs out of steam. Because there's no self in suffering. Suffering is an activity as well. There's no essential essence in suffering. One of the big contributions the Buddha made is pointing out that suffering is an activity. It's a process that's moving, shifting, and flowing, and that gets reinforced by our attachments and frozen solid. Given half a chance, suffering left alone will drain away because it needs to be reinforced.

One of the things that's so helpful about being on retreat is that by doing nothing except being aware, we're slowly beginning to give up the ways we live that reinforce our suffering. Maybe this is a silly example – I might read the news every day, and think, “I know better than all those politicians. If they'd only let me be in charge! I have to tell everyone that I know and they're wrong. I have it right. I'm the best political analyzer in the world, and I gotta let people know. They don't listen to me and they argue with me, but I'm right, so I have to argue back. It's such a headache, but it's so important to do.” But then I come on retreat, and I'm told, “Just don't do anything.” “Don't read the news?” “Yeah, don't read the news.” “But what about my important purpose in life, which is to argue with all my friends about the true nature of politics?” “Yeah, don't do that either. Just chill, just be.”

After a few days on retreat, I find that I feel a lot better. I feel clearer and lighter. The tension from my shoulders has drained away. I didn't know a mind could be this calm. “Is this okay? Maybe I've abandoned the world.

Maybe I gotta get back to the news. No, I think it's okay to be relaxed. "The whole momentum of self around the news begins to drain away. It might take a while. There might be a lot of things like this. You have your own version of this. When you come here, certain activities you do, ways of being, and selves that you've built up begin to drain away. It's often gradual. In the middle of a retreat, much of our personality is not there anymore. Maybe you don't realize this until you come to the end of the retreat and it comes back away too fast, and you feel, "Oh, now there's tension, and there's that suffering again."

We are not doing, relaxing, releasing, and letting be. Even making a project out of letting go of the hindrances can sometimes be too much. It's powerful to just see them and let them be. It's powerful just to know, "Oh, here are the hindrances. I won't participate. They're still powerful, but I'm just going to let them be. Back off. I'm not going to do anything." If you're able to not identify with them, just let them be. Don't make a self out of them. Don't define yourself by them. Don't be troubled by them. It's a lot easier.

It's easy to hear these teachings like the construct of self as a problem and think we're supposed to deconstruct it, and then we create more self around not being able to do that. The lucid, clear awareness that we're trying to have here is about trying to just see things as they are without making anything of them. So if you are making a self (maybe you're doing a good job) just know it: "Oh, that's how it is for me. That's a making of self. Usually, I don't even know I'm doing it, but here I can see it. Wow, that's pretty cool. That's kind of a nice one. I'm doing a good job. Oh, there's another one. There's another construction of self. Wow."

At some point, you back off, open up, and see it clearly, and there's freedom there: the freedom of knowing without entanglement; the freedom of knowing without coming to conclusions about what it means; the freedom of knowing without having a self-definition as part of the game; a freedom of knowing that allows it to be known without being for or against it; the freedom of knowing that lets something be. The freedom of knowing that's willing to just keep knowing and just calls it awareness. The freedom of knowing that is interested. Is there a knower who's being the knower of what's known? There it is, for sure. There's a little pressure, a little tension in being the knower. The freedom of knowing that tension. Just know.

I sometimes think of lucid awareness (*paññā*) – turning on the light in the room, or mindfulness, or knowing – as giving breathing room to everything. When you compress gas in a small container it builds up a lot of pressure and gets hot. But if you give the gas a lot of room, it spreads out and disappears. Give lots of breathing room so the tight springs can unwind, the tension can be released, and the clinging can drain away.

Maybe that was a lot of ideas to offer during this talk. But I want to end by emphasizing what I've said already so what remains in you from the whole talk is this: Don't do so much. Do less. Do less and remain aware. And go about your days on the retreat staying with that awareness as continuously as you can, so awareness comes back as often as possible. Give breathing room to your experience as much of the time as you can. But try not to do it too much. Instead, allow it. Allow awareness as much as you can. If you have to do something, just do it continuously.

There is something required – a certain kind of diligence is needed. Doing nothing doesn't mean you just go to the beach or go back to sleep. There is real diligence in this practice. It is not meant to be stressful or exhausting. It's the diligence to have a relaxed awareness that doesn't add to the tension or do all the doings. It's almost an undoing, but you have to be diligent so that the drain plug stays off the drain. If you want to empty the bathtub of water, don't leave the plug in. If you pull it out just for a few seconds and put it back in again, the dripping water might still fill the bathtub. Keeping open awareness, giving breathing room to everything, staying aware and present – this is how the plug stays off. Then the suffering, attachments, and tension have a much better chance of draining away. Offering, cultivating, and developing awareness is like breathing room or drainage room. Then you're a refuge for yourself. Then the Dharma is your refuge, in the activity of being aware. Thank you.

