Suffering and the end of suffering, freedom from fixed views, and the natural functioning of our life flowing freely through us, sometimes taking the form of love or care or compassion, all lead to, support, and point to liberation and the path of liberation – a path that liberates us from suffering and brings about the end of suffering. I believe these are the foundations of the core teachings that I base my teachings, my practice, and my life on.

Today the topic is liberation and the path to liberation. What's delightful in this tradition is the principle that before liberation there is practice and after liberation there is practice. The practice moves continuously through us. Even after the Buddha was fully awakened, he would go into the forest to practice meditation. In a sense, the difference between before and after an experience of awakening doesn't matter that much.

What matters is that we practice and that the practice is sincere. The founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, Suzuki Roshi, made a well-known statement when someone asked him, "If I do Zen, will I become enlightened?" His reply was: "If your practice is sincere, that's almost as good." And so, before enlightenment: practice, after enlightenment: practice. Maybe, in a way, enlightenment doesn't matter that much for what we dedicate our life to.

It is important not to be too caught in the idea of some experience of awakening, but instead, to devote oneself to continuing to practice the Dharma – the mindfulness, the compassion, the concentration, the ethics – all the different pieces of the Eightfold Path.

One of the things I like to emphasize is for the goal to be found in the means. The goal is a radical way of not being caught up in anything – a radical way of being free from being stuck, obsessed, and oppressed by our own minds and hearts, by our fear, upset, dismay, criticism, and anger. If that's the goal, the means to that goal should contain some of the qualities of the goal.

This doesn't mean we can just wipe away the ways that we are attached. But we can begin finding a way to be mindful and aware and bring our attention to what's difficult in us – our attachments. We can do this in such a way that the way of attending is free of attachment, free of being caught, to some degree. Even if this is just to some degree, if the means contain part of the goal, that's enough to begin seeing a sliver, a little hint of freedom: "Oh, this is what it's like to be present without any attachment, without any resistance, without any shutting down, holding on, or self-preoccupation. This is what it's like to be free of preoccupation."

When we start getting a little sense of freedom, then we can be guided by that. "Oh, this is good. This is the way forward. This is what the path is about." We can have some confidence that we can find that in ourselves in the way that we're mindful, aware, and care for our practice. One way of understanding practice is that that little sliver of freedom that we begin to recognize in how we're aware begins to grow. It begins to spread and becomes bigger and bigger.

It is still the same practice, but rather than focusing on having some deep insight, getting concentrated, or aiming toward something, behind that, or in the very mode in which we engage in the practice, something is growing and getting bigger until it fills us. This grows until it shows us the deep experience of freedom that's possible.
The Theravada tradition emphasizes talking directly about recognizing what greed, hate, and delusion are like and what attachment is like so we can find a way to practice without them. Some other schools of Buddhism point to a different possibility. They have different ways of pointing the practitioner to the place of non-clinging and to abiding there the best they can. Over years, that abiding grows and develops until the sense of non-clinging becomes more pervasive in who they are.

This is the growth of freedom. Well before awakening, there are small awakenings, small senses of being awake. I love being awake as a metaphor for liberation from clinging and suffering. I don't know if it works for everyone; I don't know what conditions might interfere with this for people. But some of us might have the experience of waking up from a good sleep, maybe, for some people, having a nice cup of coffee, where there's a sense of wakefulness that is independent of what we're aware of.

If we're tired and grumpy and things are challenging and difficult, then it's almost as if everything the eyes gaze on is just difficult and challenging. Everything is seen as difficult. Even our awareness and thoughts about it don't feel good. But when we wake up from a really good nap, or we sit on a park bench on a day when we don't have any work or responsibilities – just sitting there with nowhere to go, nothing to do, no one to be, just looking at children playing, or squirrels running around, or the wind in the trees – there's a feeling of contentment, and just being alive is enough, independent of what we know, what we're aware of.

There is a beautiful feeling of just being awake. It feels clear and crisp and content. There is a clarity that's expansive without edges. And then we go into the kitchen and there's a mess in the kitchen sink but there's no reactivity to that. It's just like this, too, is happening in the clarity. If you have an experience like this on a park bench or waking up from a nap or something, this experience is a guide for what freedom is like and what's possible.

There might be other things in our lives that have given us a foretaste of what liberation is. We are growing that foretaste; we're developing it. When a definitive experience of awakening and radical freedom from all suffering becomes really clear, that registers deep in our consciousness and our hearts in such a way that now there's a reference point for living in freedom.

Then we still want to practice, that's still the dedication, but the challenge now is that we know something that we don't want to compromise. We don't want to give in to the forces of harm, hatred, or fear, because they interfere with this capacity for freedom. That freedom is the channel, the open door for the wholesome goodness of our hearts, for our capacity for love, compassion, generosity, and our intention to be of service to others and care for the world.

So after some experience of liberation, for a while, there can be a debate going on inside of us between, “Do I get angry at the condition of the world? Do I get dismayed? Do I get afraid?” and “Is it okay to stay in this place of freedom without clinging, without attachment, and without preoccupation?” Inevitably, if you do this practice well, freedom wins in the debate. Greed, hate, and delusion don't win. Fear does not win. Dismay does not win, because if we do that, it diminishes us. We lose something. We harm ourselves. Over time we see that we also start harming others in subtle or sometimes big ways.

There are quite a few people engaged in fighting for justice who have fought for justice using the same forces of greed, hate, and delusion to fight for justice that are the very reason why there's injustice. Of course, we want to bring justice to the world. But knowing how to bring freedom and wakefulness and spread that into the world is another possibility.

So before awakening, there is the practice, which can be informed and guided by an intuition of freedom. After awakening, there can be not just an intuition, but a knowing of freedom that really sets the stage to guide us to freedom.

I hope that you can learn to appreciate that the goal can be in the means. I hope that nourishes you, supports you, guides you, and inspires you in your practice. I hope that through this practice, you can benefit all beings.

Thank you very, very much for today.