

Opening the Dharma Eye

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As many of you know, the word *vipassanā* is the Pāli word, the ancient word that's used for our meditation practice sometimes, which we say we do *vipassanā* practice. Now what I want to highlight is that *vipassanā*, the root of the word *passanā*, means to see, and the "vi-" is an emphatic prefix. So it's kind of like to see in some special way or an important way. Some of us like to translate it as clear seeing. As you know, it's often translated as almost like the brand of Buddhism, "insight," translates as insight. So "insight meditation," and it has the word "sight" or "seeing" in it.

This ability to see is not only about physical seeing—some people can't see—but it's the ability to perceive through any of the senses, or to be able to see through the mind's eye, the wisdom eye, the Dharma eye, which is the place in the mind where we are really present for what's happening, and there's wisdom about it. There's a penetrating understanding about what is happening here. In fact, the experience of that real penetration of what's happening in our lives, in the Dharma as we mature, is called opening the Dharma Eye, a *dhammacakkhu*. So opening the Dharma Eye, the idea of seeing clearly—there's also, when we open the Dharma eye, we see the Dharma. The Dharma, which is visible here and now, is clearly seen there. Sometimes they even talk about it: with the Dharma eye open, there is knowledge and vision.

For those who know a little bit about Hinduism or some of the yogic traditions, the word for a vision is *dassana*, which in Sanskrit is *darśana*, and now which is a very powerful word. *Darśana* is often used for sitting in the presence of a guru, where the guru is in sight, as if seeing the teacher is really powerful. Here in this tradition, it is seeing the truth, seeing the real Dharma, the experience directly. *Ājñā* is very powerful knowledge. The seeing, this vision, is over and over again emphasized in this tradition.

So imagine that the city goes on a hike and leaves the city. You are living in maybe a metropolitan area, but there's a mountain on the edges of it, and you go for a nice long hike up in the mountains, higher and higher. If you don't like the hike, maybe there's a gondola that carries you up to the heights, but you're up to the top, and you get near the top, and there's a tunnel that goes in, and you go through. Or you get close to the top, and there's a big door, two doors, double doors. Now you open these double doors, and you step forward onto this little bit wide ledge on the other side of the mountain.

There on that ledge is this vast panorama of mountain after mountain after mountain ranges, rivers, forests, birds flying, eagles flying around, hawks, clouds. You're up high in the mountains, this vast space that is so clear and broad and wide. It can take your breath away. It's so beautiful, this natural world. Maybe in a healthy, wonderful way, you feel very small, or you feel like you're part of this amazing natural world that we live in. But you're on the ledge, looking out at it, and it's just a sense of awe.

It isn't that you want anything; you're not leaning forward, trying, "I want that. I want that mountain on that mountain." It isn't that you're identifying yourself with the scenery there, the rivers and the forest, and the trees, and saying, "Well, that's mine," or "that's how I want to be." It's just like the sense of self and self-concern drop away. Back in the city, when you knew people, and all kinds of social concerns are operating. Here on this ledge, looking out at this amazing scene, self-concern drops away, and in fact, a kind of self-forgetting.

We look across the scene, and some of what we see seems dangerous—some of the mountain tops in the distance. There's a storm brewing, and there's snow up there, and you're glad you're not there, because that looks like it could be quite dangerous to be caught in that storm. But it's far away. Or you see these rushing rivers, and of course it's pastoral and wonderful from a distance. But you know, if you were to cross that river, it would be treacherous to cross it. It's roaring down now.

You can see that some of the paths on the side of the cliff going down to the valley below are treacherous little thin paths, and it'd be dangerous to walk down there. But you're not going down there, so the danger has no fear for you. That's the beauty, the pastoral nature of it, the peacefulness, setting the danger that's there. Standing on the ledge and looking out, just taking it all in a peaceful, open, comfortable way, feeling secure on the ledge, not being for or against anything, just at ease, taking it all in. Then you turn around to go back. When you turn around, you find out that you're actually on another ledge that's facing the city.

You look down at the city, and some of it's quite inspiring and beautiful, and some of it is these beautiful buildings, tall buildings, and some of it clearly is treacherous and dangerous,

and there's smog and fires and places. The city, there are clearly poor places that people are in squalor, and places of excessive wealth, and then, you know, but there is also the edges of the city, and beyond the edges, there is as vast a green plains, grasslands, and beyond that, other mountains, and oceans, and rivers, and the city is just part of this wider, big circle. You see it all, but you're high on the ledge. Again, you are there right now. There is no inclination to be judging it, to be for or against it. It just all seems to be in the context of this vastness, of the natural unfolding of this universe, and you sitting on the ledge just watching it.

Even though you go back down to it, defining yourself by it, being caught by desires and this and that doesn't exist, it just kind of takes in this wide field, and there's a stillness and quiet within you as you gaze out upon the scene. Maybe this analogy is pointing to the ability to be gazing out of the ledge of your eyes. If you can see physically, see, you know, that's your mountain top on your head, and the ledge is your, you know, maybe the bottom rim of your eye socket and you're looking out. How do you look when you look out into the world? Do you look with an agenda? Does your looking serve as the servant of your fear and anxiety, darting around, looking how to make yourself safe?

Does your looking serve as a servant of your desires, looking for what you can get and do the next thing and next things? I think that some of us, you know, sometimes get pulled into web surfing, and the eyes are looking and looking and getting and going to the next thing, and they're busy. They're not at rest and at ease just looking at the scene. Or is there a seeing in the service of what's wrong, the aversion we have, or is the seeing of, you know, how to—how is that seeing? Or is it just like settling on that ledge on the mountain, looking out on a scene, a natural scene that we don't have to identify with, we don't have to judge, we don't have to have any agendas with? We just gaze peacefully with the calm eyes, with the relaxed eyes, soft eyes, taking it all in in a nice way.

When I first went to practice in Thailand, I practised in a small monastery meditation centre outside of Bangkok, and it was an interesting place with a variety of things. There was a man there, a monk, who it was explained was an extremely mature practitioner and a deep meditator. In fact, I was told that he had attained something called *nirodhasamāpatti*, that he could sit in a state of suspended animation, a certain kind of state of cessation, unmoving for seven days. He could just drop into this deep state, and so I don't know, but he could actually do that. But that's what I was told. So I met him, and I talked to him, and the thing that was so remarkable about him was looking into his eyes.

It wasn't like his eyes were deeply receded, exactly like physically receded, but there was something about looking in his eyes. They felt like looking into these amazing depths, kind

of like being on that ledge in the mountains, looking out at this huge natural scene, or looking out at the night sky, and it is so deep and vast. There was something about looking at his eyes that this man is deep. There's depth there, spaciousness there. Some of it was that his eyes were not darting around. His eyes were kind of at rest, and at ease.

It wasn't like he was staring at me, but he wasn't not looking at me. His eyes were not bulging out, his eyes were not pulling back. He was just there, and I kind of—there was a feeling inside I had that this man's mind is not agitated. It's at ease. In that ease, he's just looking, and it's kind of like looking, and there's no one. I mean, one thing that went way—it's talked about sometimes in Theravāda Buddhism, which some of you might not like this kind of description, but is that all the lights were on. He was fully conscious and awake, but it was like a house where all the lights were on but no one's home. So everything was firing, everything was clearly there, but there was no place of self, no centre he was holding on to, no contraction around self, me, myself and mine. It was kind of this vast emptiness that I experienced.

So to see, to be able to see as if and become free is a phenomenal thing, because as we begin practicing, as we practise, and we start seeing, understanding, feeling that the way we see is all these things are sticky. Things are going to stick themselves onto the seeing, and we don't just see clearly. We see with desire, we see with fear, we see with judgment, we see with interpretations, we see with bias, we see with bias about who we are. We see about projections and ideas and identities this way, that way. I have to do this. I'm supposed to do that.

All these ideas are sticky, and they stick onto the eyesight or the perception that we have. Sometimes it's really clear that they are agitating and with an agenda. The mind, the eyes, or the perception, the hearing, whatever it is, is darting around and moving and wanting. When there's no other sticky stuff, then there's just seeing. It's kind of like if the smog clears, or the fog clears, and we see after a long time not seeing it how clear the air is, and we see the mountains in the distance we don't normally see. It isn't so much that we're seeing anything but the absence of smog. We see the clarity. Is clarity a thing? Not exactly a thing, but the clarity is there.

The same thing can happen with the mind. The mind can become clear, and there's no self-preoccupation, self-assertion. There's no self-criticism or self-belittling. We don't have to do no self-apology. The self is not in the seeing and the perception. The same thing, when we turn inward, we stand on the edge of the eyes, and we look inside, and we see all kinds of things in there as we go along in practice. Sometimes it's said that self-knowledge is seldom good news, because some of what we see is we see our bias, and our projections, and

our fears, and our interpretations, and our shortcomings, and all kinds of things operating in there. They can be a source of agitation, that can be fuel for continued identification, ideas, interpretations of ourselves: I'm a bad person, wrong because doing this, and an embarrassment to the Buddhist world because I had an attachment. To be able to sit on the metaphoric ledge of our eyesight and look back into ourselves, just like we would look out into the natural world with this unmoving mind, with this peaceful eyesight, not darting around, not wanting and not wanting, not interpreting, just looking.

Of course, some of the things that you might see may not be your best qualities, but maybe you don't have to identify with it or do anything with it. In fact, if you do nothing, just see it, maybe something inside will be slightly amused or slightly kind of liberated, "Oh, just is just a natural phenomenon." So we're seeing what's there, and this ability to see with a kind of unmoving mind, with a mind that's at peace and at rest, that clearly sees. But it's not darting around, not straining, trying, no strain, no trying to understand, no searching, no stickiness of self, me, myself, and mine, no self in the seeing. Just seeing. It's something about the eyesight—maybe that may be hearing as well—where in the seeing, and in the hearing itself, there's no added. We don't—the seeing itself doesn't add so much. So we can see at some point, all the stuff that we add, the judgments, interpretations, and the desires we have—those are all extra. To see them is extra. But to see with this quiet, still, soft, easy eyesight, to see the Dharma eye that is opened that Buddhism talks about, the Buddha takes. Opening the Dharma eye happens when there is a clear seeing, undisturbed seeing.

When the mind, the eyesight, or the inner eye is not agitated, at peace, we can just quietly gaze out on the world, quietly gaze on what's inside to see the direct experience as things. We start seeing how things arise and disappear, how they come and go, how experiences are transient, and they move in flux and change. There's something about seeing in this still, peaceful, clear seeing how things are in flux and changing that frees us from the identifications, the attachments, the stickiness of all these ideas and the desires and feelings that go along with seeing. There is a kind of allowing this to flow, the stream of things, experiences to happen through, and to appreciate how everything is just coming and going, and in the going of it, allowing things to come and go in the going of it. Then there also is this freedom from attachment, from clinging. There also is this clarity and simplicity of clear seeing, of just being at rest, at ease, on a ledge overlooking a vast natural world, on an edge ledge, looking at the vast natural world that includes all the things that humans create in a part of it.

Maybe be inspired, maybe be free, maybe have compassion, maybe have the heart break at some of things we see, but there's only seeing. Or say, it may be a little more accurately,

there is clear seeing without self caught up in the seeing. That clear seeing makes room and space for the heart, for all other things, to operate in a kind of natural way. So both literally, you might be mindful of your eyes and seeing, and see how much, how you use your physical eyes. How often do you roam? How often are they darting around? How often are they at rest? How often are they just gazing quietly and peacefully like you're watching a river, sitting on the bank of a river, watching the river go down or looking at the sky, at the clouds floating, just kind of relaxed and open, peaceful. How much are they agitated? In the service of desires and fears and aversions?

Then, also more deeply in the mind, is there stuff your mind does that is sticky, that sticks itself onto your sight? So your sight is not so clear. What experience have you had of clear seeing? Can this idea of an unmoving mind, in a certain kind of way, in unmoving eyes that just see without getting agitated by anything, be a reference point for you to understand and to gaze upon the inner world of how we do get caught and how we do get sticky? In all these complicated ways that you see when you look inward, can you discover how to look upon it also with an unagitated mind, with unagitated sight? It's all nature. It's all natural phenomena coming and going. To switch the paradigm of how we see from seeing through the lens of me, myself, and mine, and self, and identity to the other paradigm where we just see it as nature, as natural phenomena coming and going—certainly things that we respond to and care for and take care of when it's appropriate, but without this huge, heavy filter of self. Gazing upon the world inward and outward with mind, with eyes that are cool, not feverish, eyes that are peaceful, not agitated, eyes that are caring, not hostile. May your Dharma eye open, and so thank you.