

Thursday Dharma talk

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I'll begin by reading a poem. It's for me the poem of the year. It's by May Sarton, and it's called, Can I Weave a Nest of Silence? Just the title is enough. Can I weave a nest of silence? But this is the poem. In case you don't know, Phoebe is a kind of a small bird.

The Phoebe sits on her nest hour after hour, day after day, waiting for life to burst out from under her warmth. Can I weave a nest of silence? Weave it of listening, listening, listening, layer upon layer, but one must first become small, nothing but a presence, attentive as a nesting bird, pro-offering no slightest wish toward anything that might happen or be given. Only the warm, faithful waiting, contained in one's smallness, beyond the question the silence, before the answer, the silence. So as I mentioned, I think that the Buddha uses a similar analogy, not as poetic as a Phoebe sitting on its eggs in a nest, but of a chicken sitting on its eggs. And the analogy is directly to ourselves, that we're sitting on something, maybe we don't want to call them eggs exactly, but sometimes they're called in Buddhism seeds.

We're sitting here, weaving ourselves a nest in which something can grow, something can incubate, something that we can't engineer, can't make happen, something that will grow out of the naturalness of who we are. And perhaps the nest, the materials for the nests that we're weaving, are all our attentional faculties categorized as knowing, sensing and relaxing, calming. And I find it quite important. And one of the reasons we sit to become quiet, we're quieting at least the discursive mind, quieting the story mind, the conversation mind, the commentary mind, the fantasy mind. Having that become quiet, so that there can be a unification, a gathering together of all the different ways in which we can really be present here, and a full embodied that forms a nest, that allows something to develop and happen. And maybe a small example of how well we can be available or open to perceive, to know, to recognize, to feel, to understand.

All of it can come together in a second when it's needed. So each day this week, in order for me to be able to sustain a nice even way of being at this retreat for a month, I go down to the park for a run. I sleep better, all kinds of things. I'm a better teacher. But where the trails I run in, it's a kind of mountain trail. It's kind of narrow. and they're mountain bikers zipping along.

There's not enough space for both of us. And the first one who I came upon immediately pulled over, put his foot into the kind of bushes there kind of, and made room for me to walk by. And I said, I said, thank you. And I said, oh, just careful. They're just ahead of you, it was poison hook. And he said, I'm good. So that was nice.

So then further along... There was a curve in the trail, so I couldn't see anything coming. And suddenly there was a bite coming. And what happened next, I believe, happened in no more than a second. I think it was faster. That the trail was too narrow for him to make room for me. I knew that there was a little bit of space to my left that I could stand aside.

I knew there was no poison oak there. And I knew that he was... In that half second he had begun to stop as well. And if he hadn't been there with his bike, if someone two minutes later would say, hey, you remember back there at that curve? Do you think there would have been enough space for you to step aside there? Do you think there would, when there was enough space for both of you to pass each other there? Do you think there was poison oak there?

I would have said, I have no idea. I don't remember that. I wasn't paying attention. But I was. Something was paying attention. I was not thinking a lot. I was mostly just being as present as I could for the run and the trail and taking in the whole experience and all the different senses.

And it was a rather complicated mental processing, taking in a lot of different data. But luckily I had somehow been available for all the data, letting it come in, and it all kind of came and harmonized together and together with an action. So this idea that if we're of not being caught in thought, not being lost in discursive thought, but being attentive, open, sensing, feeling, knowing, in all the different ways we can, we don't even know all the ways that we're sensing and knowing in any given moment. I don't think we can possibly know all the data, all the information our senses are taking in, kind of under the hood. But we can be open to receive it. We can be available for it, not distracted.

And available, so there's space in the mind and the heart for it all to come together and operate. And this is true for *paññā*, for wisdom in Buddhism. Wisdom itself, the deep wisdom of Buddhism, is more like that deep operating system, deep understanding that just happens

from really being present, really being here. And it's not like we figure it out. We're allowing this whole rich world of sensing and knowing and letting go and relaxing to begin operating more and more fully and deeply and harmoniously and wisely. We are all profound human beings who underutilize our profundity because of how shallow our thinking is.

When I first came to Buddhism for many years, I only had one way of understanding thinking. It's kind of like in meditation, I shouldn't think. Thinking is bad. But over the years, I've come to appreciate that there are many different kinds of thinking. Some of it is unhelpful. Some of it is very helpful. Some of it's quite appropriate in meditation.

I think discursive thinking, conversations, fantasies, commentary, elaborate commentary, a lot of anticipatory thinking about the future, figuring it out how it's going to be, and a lot of reviewing the past. or a lot of making up the past, might have a time and place, but they crowd the mind. They crowd the space of awareness. They crowd, they kind of make the windshield all dirty so we can't see through it. And one of the conditions for a lot of discursive thinking, a lot of thinking, is the tensions we carry within us. Tensions in the mind, tensions in the body, tensions in the heart.

The more tense we are, it's almost like, you know, you've said this before, but that we're a tube of toothpaste. And if we keep squeezing the tube, the toothpaste is going to come out, no matter how many times you tell them not to. As long as we're tense, there's a kind of pressure that can go onto the thinking mind that kind of elicits thoughts, makes thoughts, wants to think. Yeah. it can get claustrophobic in that tightness. It can be very crowded, and so crowded that our senses, our ability to perceive clearly in the present moment, gets crowded out.

And one of the reasons it's so profound to relax the body is that it begins to relax the mind. What we're relaxing in the first tetrad is the tensions that have been created by the tension of the mind. We don't want to relax everything. There's an appropriate tautness. There's an appropriate engagement of the muscles to stay upright, to engage in this world, to keep the spines straight. What we're relaxing is the ways the body has been tensed by the touchments, the clings, the resistances of the mind. And it gives us the opportunity... to think better.

Then we have room to think about the present moment, asking ourselves the question, how should I practice now? Given how I am, what's the right way? Where should attention be? How much effort should I make? A useful way sometimes of thinking, especially if everything else is so, especially if this is the best alternative available to you, is to think yourself instructions in meditation. Give yourself instructions. It might seem like you're busy and doing a lot, but sometimes it's better than the alternative.

And it's its instructions, come here, be here, show up, here, now, this. What is this? How's my breathing? Is my breathing comfortable? Can I soften the belly so it's more comfortable? So it's easier to engage in the breathing. So breathing is more a home, a place to be.

Would it be nice to sit up a little straighter? Nope, you're straight enough. Oh yes, it's just a nice little energy that comes. I sit up a little bit with the chest open. I wonder if I can give myself instructions in meditation with a voice that's calming, meditative, a voice that's pointing to the quieting of the mind. There are ways of thinking that point us beyond thinking, that point us to silence, that point us to being aware, that remind us to come back, to start again. And then there are layers of thinking.

And some thoughts are very simple. They're not as complicated as giving yourself instructions. Maybe all it is is a single word. Stay, stay, stay there, stay, stay, feel. Or it might be not directive like that, but it might just simply be a simple word of recognition. The knowing, cold, in in breath, in exhale, tingling. And there again you can question, you know, wonder, is there some way of saying these very little steps of knowing of what I'm experiencing?

Yeah. Can I say it in a voice that supports the quieting, supports the concentration, supports the quietings, silencing of a thinking mind? And then there's the non-verbal knowing. All the knowing that had to happen with that bicyclist on the trail, and I stepped aside, I don't think there was a single word involved in my mind when that happened. There was a lot of knowing. I knew what a bicycle is. I knew what poison oak was.

I knew the width of the trail. I knew all kinds of things. But that was just operating in a simple, ordinary, deep, quiet way, a natural way. So there's a period of time in the retreat where we're preparing ourselves. It's kind of like we're making a nest for ourselves. Developing and appreciating, respecting, our capacities to be present, our capacities to know as present moment knowing, to be available to know, to be available to sense and feel, to make room for all the different capacities for sensing and feeling, the capacity to hone awareness, hone sensing and knowing, by having it really stay close and continuous, where some things really stay and feel, coast, ride, glide, take in, without jumping around a lot.

Just like a bird maybe sits in the middle of a nest and the nest little bit like a trampoline settles there, sinks a little bit, staying with a breath, like the center of the nest. And everything kind of, all the weight of awareness, which is no weight at all, but all comes and rests there, is there to be held or to operate. Weave me a nest of silence, to rest in the silence, to rest in the sensing. So it's a whole process that's developing and growing, and there's a few steps along the way that can help this process of creating this nice nest. And that is to begin being present for the details of our experience rather than the generalizations. We could generalize

quite well, but the idea is what is actually happening?

What's the details? What's the specific perception, specific aspects that information we're taking in? If I leave that little bicycle incident with the alarming thought, that was a crazy, dangerous situation. It wasn't really, but... I'm generalizing, I'm making into this big thing. What was it? There was all these little details that I had to take in and be present for and to know in order to be safe.

If I say that I have a lousy meditation one day, boy, that meditation was lousy. That's generalizing. That's living in abstraction. What was it really like? Well, it seems like I could only follow three breaths at a time. That was all. Well, that wasn't all.

I was also deeply disappointed in myself. I thought I did a lousy job. I should have known better. I should have known not to have six cookies at lunch. Boy, am I lousy. No wonder I had a lousy meditation. As opposed, that's kind of into this big.

But stay in the stay. Don't look at the forest. Look at the trees. Oh, three breaths. Okay. The mind wandered away, three breaths again, the mind wandered away. Oh, look at that, it's happening repeatedly.

No judgment, no story. Just this is how it is. This meditation was like this. Maybe I can see the details better. Oh, it seems to wander off into thought because every time I felt a breath, I felt how full my stomach was from the 13 cookies I ate. Yeah, it's kind of uncomfortable. Okay, well, just sense and feel and know and relax.

I feel this is what a distended stomach is like. This is being uncomfortable. This is not liking it. This is tensing up around it. This is relaxing. This is recognizing not liking. So all these little details, and when we see the details, we don't get... kind of caught in the authority of the story, the power of the impulses, the mood of the generalizing, judging, categorizing mind.

We might see that maybe there's disappointment and it's just disappointment. Roses are red, violets are blue, and now there's disappointment. That's all. Just the simple detail, the simple thing in the moment. So this movement in *Satipaṭṭhāna*, this movement towards moving away from the generalizations to really start getting closer to the experience, happens here in this first foundation. If you remember that in the first tetrad, the instructions are breathing in when senses the whole body, breathing out when senses the whole body.

When there's the mindfulness of posture, that's also kind of the whole body. But then as it moves on, it's going into a little more the details, the details of activities of stretching your arm, eating, no longer with a hole. In the next exercise, it's beginning to wear the parts of the

body. It's almost like we're sinking in. We're opening to the hole, breathing with the hole, feeling the hole. But as we settle more and more, we settle into, deeper into the parts of the whole.

There tends to be more of a, the mind wants to settle. There's almost sometimes a gravitational pull for attention to move towards, to be with, to settle into, to open up to. The detail is knowing at the moment. So the... And what's fascinating to me is the next exercise in *Satipatthāna*, the verb that is used, that's what we're supposed to do, Vikkubode translates it as review when reviews. The Pali word means something like to look over oneself, to view, maybe to imagine. Because some of these things, it's hard for me to imagine that how well people in the ancient world knew these body parts unless they, I mean...

So practitioner reviews, views, considers this very body upward from the soles of the feet and downwards from the hair of the head, covered with skin and full of various kinds of unclean things. So it's only unclean if someone serves any of this on your dinner plate. Now you see it in gory traffic accidents, but I've looked into bodies. I've looked into the side of corpses and I've seen inside of living bodies. Seeing surgeries or they were opened up and I could see. And it was beautiful. I would just characterize it not as unclean, but just beautiful. but not for dinner.

In this body, there is head here, body here, nails. Those three things involve billion dollar businesses in the United States. There's a lot of preoccupation with those three things, but I can guarantee you that your head here, body here, and nails couldn't care less. They're perfectly content, just be as they are. And so can you in this practice. Just allow each of these things to be them, leave them alone. Just know them.

It's very respectful to let things be as they are. And this becomes more important as we go further down. Then it goes on, teeth, skin, So that's also a billion-dollar business. It's a preoccupation of people. Flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, and blood. Tears, grease, saliva, snot. I think many of you, if the snot's in the wrong place and someone else is probably kind of like unclean, kind of. Joint fluid and urine.

So now we're kind of taking in the fact that we're made up of all these parts. Right? And sometimes it can, as we settle in, then there's a sensation in the knee, and now it's just the knee we're feeling, the nearness of the knee, the back, the hands. It's really now just a part of the whole, but now we're entering into the part. If there's settling into, as if nothing else exists even sometimes, just so fully, without... making a big deal of it. Just, oh, here is a part. Here's the sensations.

Just as if a person with good eyesight were to look into a sack with an opening at each end filled with various kinds of seeds, such as fine rice, paddy rice, mung beans, carponzo beans, sesame seeds, and husk rice, And one would recognize that this is fine rice, this is patty rice, these are mung beans, these are garbanzo beans, these are sesame seeds. So a romantic reviews this very body, upward from the soles of the feet and downward from the hair of the head, covered with skin and full of various kinds of unclean things. I love this metaphor because I've seen bags of beans and rice and sometimes they're exquisitely beautiful. full of color and beautiful shapes. And so this is in Thailand, I know that monks, people who are ordained monastics, this was the first instruction, the first practice they were given was to do this. And they kind of do it as a concentration practice to memorize these 31 parts of the body and just go through it and feel or imagine or see these different parts of the body and over and over and over again. as a kind of, to get the mind concentrated and focused, and also to be in the body, connected to the body, centered in the body, fully here.

But I like to think of it as a settling into the details, not just, not, kind of supporting us, not to go along with the mind's tendency to generalize and judge and come up with stories and big, big ideas about things. It's very forgiving this mindfulness to just be with how it is. Just the facts, just the details, just this moment. It's this way. So much of our experience that we have is not asking to be judged. It's not asking to be blamed or be desired or be undesired. Our experience is just there in a kind of very innocent way. The details of the moment here.

And this movement towards not taking the generalization of who we are, but see us made up of parts, all these conditioned parts, all these moving parts, all these... I believe as part of this movement to allow all the total whole to begin operating together. And this wisdom of the whole psychophysical system operating as an integrated, coordinated whole. this unification process here that comes as we stay here, be with this, open up here, feel all this. And that movement continues in the next exercise, which is being aware of the four body properties. It's usually called the four elements. Okay.

A practitioner reviews, same word, this body, however it stands, however it is positioned, in terms of properties, in terms of these characteristics or elements, elemental sensations. In this body, there is the earth property, the water property, the fire property, and the air property. The core practice that I learned in Asia, it's the foundation of my mindfulness practice and teaching, Mahasi practice. The Mahasi Sayadaw, the teacher who kind of formulated, he describes it as what he's teaching, is a four elements, four properties meditation, because the core aspect of what he was teaching was sensing the sensations, staying close to sensations, and feeling the details of each sensations. And this is now really dropping down out

of generalizations into something much more elemental and much more basic. So the hand, we all have a hand, and some of you have done this exercise with me, but if you close your eyes and feel one of your hands, of course most of us know that it's the hand there, But the direct experience of that part of the body doesn't require the word hand.

But the direct experience are sensations. Tinkling, temperature, vibration, contact, pressure, weight, maybe a little ache here and there. The palm of the hand probably feels different than the back of the hand. The fingers have their own sensations. Maybe some fingers have stronger sensation than others. There might be some sensations that are more associated with the surface of the skin. Some sensations feel like they're deeper in the hand.

And to stay close to the sensations, because with your eyes closed, those are the building blocks by which we know the hand. and those building blocks of sensations don't need the label hand for it to understand. In fact, there's a certain kind of way handness, the hand of hand falls away, the concept, the idea. And there's just this detail of sensations that arise and pass and come and go. If you have your eyes closed and you're still kind of feeling your hand, And you start thinking, I don't know if any of you have had these kinds of thoughts, but it's not so uncommon for some human beings to feel like there's something wrong with their body. Fingers are too short, too long, too stubby. Fingernails are not right. There's too many wrinkles, birth spots. I mean, they can get depressing here very quickly. Right. But the hands are just fine in and of themselves.

The handness of the hands do not care how long or short the fingers are, how stubby. Don't care about the number of wrinkles or birthmarks or how long or short the fingernails are. From the inside out, from within the hand itself, sensing and feeling the sensations free from of the hegemony or thinking, judging, commenting mind. The hand is just fine. So this practice of the four properties, the four sensations or elements is the practice of really sensing and feeling even deeper below the generalizations. Now, we don't even call it a hand, we just call it just there with the sensations. It's almost like it doesn't matter that those sensations are land. And so there's a kind of a dropping of concepts, dropping of, certainly of judgments, and allowing each sensation to be there by itself, each sensation to...

And so with the earth element, sensations of solidity, weight, substantiality, pressure, and... Hardness, softness. Water, your saliva, if you swallow, your tears, if you cry. It said that the water element is what's kind of the stickiness that holds things together. The fire element, temperature, hot, cold. The air element said to be movements, the movements in your body. It's actually not really the air element, it's the wind element they say. So the wind implies movement. And so this dropping further into the world of sensations. And the thinking can

follow along, encouraging us, guiding us to keep it really simple. Guiding us to just sense and feel and kind of leave it alone. So they think the sensations can just be themselves, do their dance, appear as they do, without the overlay and the projection of so many things that we add on top of it.

The tradition, Theravadan Buddhist tradition, emphasizes how this dropping down to this very basic sensory level of experience is a way of overcoming some of the conceit of being caught up in me and mine and I. which are all generalizations, all abstractions, big concepts that get in the way of allowing us the simplicity of being, simplicity of sensing and feeling. And maybe you think that dropping down to this raw sense level, sensation level, is too simplistic. But as I want to keep emphasizing, the simpler we can allow the senses to operate, Be right there where sensing and sensations occur together. Right there where knowing is so simple. Just knows hot, cold. Just knows pressure, softness, movement, expansion, contraction. You don't have to be thinking about this and finding the right word for all of it. Let the deep mind know. Just feel, allow yourself to feel and sense.

So just with mindfulness of breathing, when I was doing this Mahasya practice in Burma, that's where we were supposed to feel, emphasize feeling, all the different sensations that came into play with every inhale and exhale. And I found it useful to really stay close and kind of guide the wave of sensations. slide on them, glide on them, flow with them, so that there's both a deeper appreciation, deeper sensing and feeling of it all, taking it all in, the sense level, and a quieting, concentrating, a gathering of attention, because we're there continuously with the whole inhale, the whole exhale. And it's a kind of a, when it's time is right and you're ready for this, when this whole system of making a nest of awareness, making a nest of knowing and sensing and relaxing, and you're really kind of being able to rest in that nest, then the thinking mind gets quieter, the conceiving mind gets quieter, the generalizing, abstracting mind gets quieter. And what we're left with is this world of sensations, as we're doing walking meditation. It's just cascading kaleidoscope of sensations as we walk. And you can get quite absorbed, quite concentrated, feeling all the little things as they ripple through. Not searching for them, not having a laser focus, but having a deep receptivity, a deep sensing, staying close to that meeting place, of awareness and our lived experience. How simple can lived experience and awareness come together? Maybe they'll always arise together, just like sensing and sensations arise together.

Knowing and what is known arise together. Awareness and what we're aware of arise together. No thinking needed. Thank you. Can I weave a nest of silence by May Sarton? The Phoebe sits in her nest hour after hour, day after day, waiting for life to burst out from un-

der her warmth. Can I weave a nest of silence, weave it of listening, listening, listening, layer upon layer, But one must first become small, nothing but a presence, attentive as a nesting bird, pro-offering no slightest wish toward anything that might happen or be given. Only the warm, faithful waiting, containing in one's smallness, beyond the question, the silence, before the answer. the silence, weaving a nest of silence from sensing, knowing, relaxing here, now.