

## Monday Dharma talk

**Gil Fronsdal**

**September 08, 2025**

**Keywords:** satipaṭṭhāna, vipassanā, papañca, kalyāṇa, kalyāṇamitta, samādhi, yoniso manasikāra, saṅkhāra, sukha, Eightfold Path

---

The process of *satipaṭṭhāna*, engaging in this practice of *vipassanā*, is sometimes understood to be a process of progressive simplification. If the most complicated way of being is to be completely caught swirling, in *papañca*, in proliferation of thinking, and stories of all kinds, fantasies, made-up ideas about other people. Many people live in a made-up world. It was kind of a wake-up call for me. I went to study a degree in agriculture, and I was already... born again, fundamentalist, organicist, with strongly held views, held with great confidence.

And then when I went to ag school and started studying the science of it all, science of soil and nutrition, and I saw that some of my ideas about organic farming and some of my ideas about commercial farming were right, and some were completely wrong. And I was kind of like, wow, I'm capable of being so sort of zealot for made-up ideas, not based on any real evidence. So when I went to study Buddhist studies in graduate school, I remembered that, and I kind of suspected that making-up ideas... It's a little bit more common in religion than in agriculture. So I wanted to be very careful about the beliefs, the views, the ideas I've had about Buddhism. So we often live in a made-up world.

Sometimes we're uncritical of what we read and hear from others. Sometimes we're uncritical when our own mind makes up stories, they make up. I've made up stories about other people and had all kinds of emotions. They'd be strong emotions. Only at some point to discover that my made-up idea was not true. When I really met the person and find out more what was going on, I've lived in romantic fantasies for months.

They were glorious. Until I met the person, talked to them. And what in the world was I thinking? I just made most of the stuff up in my fantasy and lived with it. So the process of *vipassanā* is a simplification. And one of the things we're simplifying is the maze of stories and ideas that the mind can make up and swirl in and be caught in.

Of course, some stories are true enough. Some commentaries that we live in are true enough. It's useful to brush your teeth, but not all day long. It's useful to have some stories that are true and some commentary, but not all day long to everyone you meet. So this process of simplification begins with this complex world of stories and concepts, commentary, fantasy, that we can live in way too easily. And to begin to enter into the lived experience of the present moment, to accompany our lived experience, to be accompanied by our lived experience, and to begin relaxing the extra tension.

That we carry the tension of clinging, of resistance, of anxiety, often born from these made-up stories, made-up ideas, made-up preferences. And to simplify, relax, find ourselves centered, maybe even in certain kind of way at home, here, now. So there's no more stories overlaying our experience. He's just knowing, recognition. And it's powerful to name what's there, simply and clearly, to know it. It's powerful to feel it deeply.

But as this process simplification continues, we maybe don't have to recognize anymore. We don't have to have concepts for the experience anymore. And we know it as sensations. Not to be reductionistic or to deny the role of concepts and ideas. But as we meditate, they aren't needed anymore. They can feel so good for the mind to take a rest, take a vacation, to not be caught in the world that we're usually caught in, and to find a place of resting, abiding in sensations.

Some people love the idea of the four elements because they're abiding, they're connecting to something that brings them close to what they believe is, feel is a natural world. And they feel now they're part of the natural world, continuity, continuous with the earth, the waters, the air, the sun. And it can very meaningful to drop down into this natural world. And then the process of simplification goes further, and we no longer have to even recognize what the sensations are. It's enough just to know that it comes and goes, and it's enough to know that it's pleasant and unpleasant. That's what stands out in the simplifying mind.

And so some people might protest, that this is reductionistic, it's cutting off important parts of who we are. This is another example of this Theravāda Buddhism's world-negating tendency. And the idea is to keep getting simpler and simpler and just leave it all behind. But what happens as the mind gets simpler, especially the cognitive mind, the story mind, what happens if we start getting more sensitive to this deeper, deeper mind, the deeper place? If something begins to grow, something beautiful begins to bubble up, something can replace it, something that's often hidden, something that's maybe not very assertive, it's very nature not to be assertive. Doesn't get the eclipse, by the way, the mind, the surface mind can be assertive and dominate.

The way that anxiety can dominate. The way that the very painful ways in which people were working, we can get caught up in issues of conceit and pride and shame and dominate. Right? So the simplification, the quieting, the peacefulness, can give birth to something that arises from deep within. And what I'd like to highlight today is what can arise is a wondrous, wonderful perception, experience of beauty, inner beauty. The Buddha talked about... the possibility that by practicing *samādhi*, a person becomes skilled in beauty.

We learn to recognize that there abides within us something beautiful. And there are the word for beauty. It's its primary dictionary definition and many Indian dictionaries, Sanskrit and Pāli. The first and primary definition is it's the primary definition of the word *kalyāṇa*. *Kalyāṇamitta* is often said good spiritual friend, which is good, but maybe it's a beautiful spiritual friend. There was the expression that in English, when the Buddha was speaking English, at least, were talking about good karma.

You should do good karma. I'm sure that's good. But it lends itself to kind of being moralistic, I think. But many times, I mean, he's saying in English, good karma. To his friends back in India, he's saying, *kalyāṇa kamma*, beautiful karma, beautiful actions, beautiful acts of body, speech, and mind. And then, and then you don't get the same feeling of it being ethical, moralistic. You get a whole different feeling for what we're doing here.

To breathe beautifully. To feel a beautiful breath. I think it's Ajahn Brahm, when he talks about, when he gives meditation instruction. His *nibbidā*, his kind of symptom of... concentration that he uses for developing the concentration. Sometimes it's been, he describes it as feeling the beautiful breath. How can breath be beautiful?

I was quite surprised in my first *vipassanā* retreat to discover this feeling of beauty and cleanliness, kind of glowing from within. Wow, this is kind of a game changer to know that this is possible. And if there is this inner beauty in you, what in you is able to recognize it? How do you have to be so you can see the beauty? Is it just a matter of storming the gates of the heart and demanding to see it? I don't think that works.

Maybe you have to be prepared, you have to approach yourself in a kind of beautiful way to see the beauty. You might have a responsibility for what you bring to the table, for what you bring in how you're aware, how you attend, how you show up. It's not just a matter of showing up, it's not just a matter of being mindful. But how you're mindful, how you are present. We do have a responsibility here in this practice. This is not magical thinking.

Just be aware, be aware, be aware, be aware, be aware, be aware. Repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat. Okay. Accumulate more and more moments of where, where, where. And

since it's the more moments, the better, might as well do it faster. Speed mindfulness.

My son listens to things on YouTube at four times speed. Or maybe that's his class lectures. But anyway, it's quite something to listen to him. His YouTube thing is going, I can't follow anything. Maybe you have to have a young mind. How do you approach yourself?

What do you bring to the table? How do you show up? And this emphasis so far about having calm, of being calm, calm knowing, calm sensing, to find a way to enjoy Arthur's pleasure. In the knowing, pleasure in the sensing. Or there's a awareness sensing has a quality of allowing in it, allowing experience to show itself not demanding or expecting or trying to make something happen. How do you approach?

And is it, might there be for some of you, the reference point for doing things beautifully? This word *kalyāṇa*, in the dictionary, they also define it as excellence. It's kind of a remarkable word, excellence. I don't know exactly what it's supposed to mean in all circumstances, but when I hear the word excellence, I kind of think I associate it with a sparkle, like something sparkling. I've met, and then the other word, meaning for *kalyāṇa*, is ethical. Living in these three together. What a wonderful combination.

*Kalyāṇamitta* is someone who's beautiful from the inside, someone who has a sparkle of excellence in some ways, maybe the excellence of being ethical. I've met people who were so clearly ethical in their very being that it had such an amazing beauty to it. I just love just being in their presence. So as we simplify, something begins to arise, show itself, begins to appear. And it might not be beauty, but it might be experienced in different ways. It might be a kind of cleansing feeling of calm that spreads through the body.

It might be a feeling of pleasure, tingling, warmth, flow. It might be a kind of a very meaningful, satisfying feeling of tenderness, openness. And there's other things that can begin growing, appearing. And in fact, the further the simplification process goes, and the greater the freedom that is attained in this practice, the more the heart becomes filled, with really, with qualities the tradition sometimes calls as beautiful qualities. And the primary ones are the seven factors of awakening and the factors of the *Eightfold Path*. But not to complicate our lives, but it is a natural outcome of the simplification of the freedom.

And where does this come from? It... I like to think of them as they're growing from the *yonī*. There's a deep operating system we have within us, the *yoniso manasikāra*. *Manasikāra* could mean constructs, mental constructs, what the mind constructs. But the source of those constructs are this deep place of beauty, deep place of health, deep place of goodness. That has a chance to breathe, has a chance to show itself in this field of simplicity.

Like you can't see the moon on a cloud-filled night, but the clouds part, and there's the moon. And the contrast, the contrasting operating system in the teachings of the Buddha, also has the word *kara* in it, K-A-R-A. So *manasikāra* and *saṅkhāra*. So *kara* means construct to make what is made, to making in what is made. And *saṅkhāra* is primarily used as what the mind makes up based on greed and craving, based on attachment. The *yoniso manasikāra* are the natural constructs the mind makes from this deep operating system, from being simple, relaxed, at ease, connected, with a heightened sensitivity, openness to that part of ourselves internally, which is naturally ethical, not because it necessarily wants to be, it's just simply not going to be unethical. It feels how much it hurts to be unethical. Why would you hurt yourself?

And in the process *Satipaṭṭhāna* then, in the second foundation, there are these two areas of sensations, those sensations which arise from the surface stimulation by the world, and those sensations that don't have a worldly reason for them, nothing's happening in the world around us. It isn't that we've been praised, or isn't that we have a wonderful dessert, or isn't that we have a wonderful massage, or isn't because we have a wonderful drink, or a wonderful aroma, a wonderful external experience. In a sense, it kind of doesn't arise for a reason, that arises because of this harmony, this way of being deeply attuned, deeply sensitive to how there can be sensations coming from this deep place within, that are born from the *yonī*, born from the healthy place. And part of that is pleasant, it's pleasure, is *sukha*, which is not just pleasant and pleasure, but is a form of well-being, a form of beautiful happiness, joy. And to experience that calmly, to know it calmly, to feel it calmly, and to allow it to come and fill us. And there comes a little bit of a paradox in the deepening and simplifying of *Satipaṭṭhāna* mindfulness.

Is that in one hand there becomes this deep sensitivity to how sensations, especially those surface sensations, come and go, arise and pass. At the same time, there can be a pervasive feeling of beauty, of well-being, of happiness, of equanimity, of calm. That doesn't seem to arise and pass so quickly. And that wider field of goodness supports the mind's ability to see how so much of our experience is ephemeral, except if we have concepts and ideas that hold onto it. But if we simplify and quiet, we drop down into the ephemeral, transitory, shifting, changing world of the surface sensations. That are a huge part of who we are, and those are held by a fuller feeling, a full feeling of fullness, calm, openness, maybe beauty, that makes it easier to trust getting closer, dipping into, entering into the shifting, changing river of change.

Of thoughts, feelings, sensations, emotions. There are certain things that shift and change,

and certain things that have a little bit more of an enduring quality, which things like beauty, it's very hard to appropriate beauty. It's very hard to say, this is mine. Thank you. My beauty, I'm not going to share it. It kind of doesn't work. Okay. You can't claim beauty and remain beautiful. You can't be greedy for it. You can't. There's something about that the beauty is kind of not something that works well as something to claim this is me, myself and mine.

And so there's a variety of these kind of beautiful states, wonderful states that can arise. Yeah. That supports the letting go of holding on to self, being myself and mine, that supports trusting, deep trust to be here. Now, trust in this process of simplification, dropping down deeper and deeper. And so while the awareness, the mindfulness, the sensing and knowing, when it becomes so simple, it's almost like it's absorbed in the sensations. Those that are the surface sensations come and go, but the ones that are the deeper of the flesh, not of the flesh, this deeper place, they're there. They're a little bit more pervasive, open.

And so we start feeling the... that dipping into and resting with the changing nature of it, of it all, begins to shift the inner landscape. And for a while, it might make it feel beautiful. It might make it feel expansive. It might make it feel quite open. And sometimes what might happen is it highlights her tendency to be afraid. It highlights her tendency. Our tendencies to have aversion or greed, lust. It highlights the tendency to be confused and deluded, and that should be welcomed. Not welcome to be diversive and deluded and all that, but welcomed how we can see it.

This is my turn, my time to face this. To be with what's difficult, to be with these deeper tendencies of the surface mind. And that'll be more discussed tomorrow when we talk about the third foundation. But for now, I'm hoping to somehow convey to you that it's really good if you can trust this process of simplification and to trust that it can be practiced at any stage in... of practice at any state of being that you're in. You're not always going to be deeply concentrated and calm. Sometimes you'll be agitated. The mind's out of control. None of this is a mistake.

When you come to IRC to practice or retreat, once you're here, once you're practicing, in the context of doing the practice, there are no mistakes. It all becomes a very significant way of meeting ourselves and beating ourselves more and more deeply. Wherever you're at is the right place to practice, or whatever state you're in is the right state to practice in. You don't need to go looking or expecting or wanting a different state. It might be some of the greatest benefits you get from this practice. Is not in the deepest, quietest, stillest places you can go, but rather what you learn from the quiet places of how to know and sense and relax when you're far from quiet, how you can trust knowing, trust sensing, trust relaxing.

You begin recognizing that mindfulness, awareness, knowing, sensing, it is a kind of like a powerful entity that's always there. Though in everyday life for many people, they're always there, but that's often entangled and caught in the maze of life. But to begin finding in the complexity of the lives we can live, oh, there's this knowing, calm knowing, calm sensing. Maybe there's even beautiful knowing, beautiful sensing. Maybe there's knowing in beauty, knowing sensing in beauty. So you have two different operating systems. Most people only know about the surface operating system, the reactive operating system, who were greed and attachment are the primary fuel for their factory. In what we begin learning in this practice, there's a different operating system which is not a factory. It's more a garden where something is growing. Be careful you don't live in the factory.

Be careful with the mind that makes up stories and... that lives in fantasy, that lives rehearsing the future, that lives correcting the past. Be careful that you don't spend so much time in that world, that you are out of touch for the deeper operating system, the organic system that's beautiful, as is excellent, is ethical, provides joy and rapture and delight and happiness, the source of contentment, peace, tranquility. And whenever you can, no matter what is happening, whether it's the surface factory or the deep inner garden, if it's happening, know it beautifully. Know it calmly. Sense it sweetly. Don't have anything be the enemy. Include everything in the kindness of your attention. And just maybe something you don't even know about will settle, drop away, open up. You do have some responsibility here.

And I propose that it's... the way that you're aware. Make it your own. Make it nourishing. Make it so you're happy to be aware. Find that way to know and to sense that brings pleasure, is beautiful, and supports this progressive simplification. Okay. Thank you.