

Thursday Dharma talk, week 3

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September 18, 2025

Keywords: satipaṭṭhāna, Theravāda, seven factors of awakening, dependent arising, attachment, hindrances, five bundles, samādhi, mindfulness, liberation

Once upon a time, the Buddha was asked a question. It was asked in a small four-line verse, and he provided a four-line answer. What I want to highlight here is the question. Someone asked the Buddha, "The world is tangled in a tangle. Who is it that can untangle the tangle?" The world is tied up in knots, knotted up in knots. But who can unknot the knots?

And the Buddha proceeded to give some really simple instructions and a summary of the whole path of practice. But the answer is, one of the answers is, who can untangle the tangle? You can. It is possible, you can do it. And then the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is one of the preeminent practices offered in this Theravāda tradition for that very task. And it can be understood that we're doing this disentangling all along, maybe starting with establishing awareness.

At the very beginning it sort of says, because most people don't do that. Even to do that, in some degree you begin to separate ourselves from the tremendous obsessions we have, with preoccupations we have, attachments we have, that keeps us going and going. And then to begin directing the attention to breathing, to begin knowing. And then knowing the breathing, sensing the breathing, sensing the body. Is there changing the flow of the usual preoccupations of the mind?

And that's no small thing, especially if the usual preoccupations and concerns and attachments of the mind are not healthy for ourselves or for the world. And then to relax, also as a way of beginning to lessen the pull, the tension around some of these preoccupations, attachments, obsessions, that grab us so strongly. And if you look at the world as a whole and the amount of suffering that exists in this world, it gives a certain power or urgency to this question. The world is tangled in a tangle. Who is it who can untangle the tangle?

There are people who try to help the world who are so entangled in themselves and their concerns that they've contributed to even more entanglement. And it's a radical thing to do, to disentangle. Tangles are just like all knotted up. There's not any freedom in being fettered, being knotted up, being caught. So then as we go through this practice, *satipaṭṭhāna*, there's kind of a journey of lessening the strengths of our attachments, lessening the strengths of our obsessions, the force of the hindrances, the entanglement, the entanglements around self.

So the whole process is a simplification, simplifying, simplifying, loosening, loosening, loosening. And then we come to the instructions in this last foundation that specifically refers to these knots. And it makes the most sense to understand this, I believe, to understand that there's been a progression of simplification. And right now I'll highlight the ones that the hindrances, because the first one addressed here, is the most complicated because it involves a lot of stories. Maybe generations of stories, layers of stories, stories entangled with other stories, stories conflicting with other stories, creating new stories. Lots of stories.

This world of stories that we live in, stories are inspiring. Meaningful, they give life and they destroy. But to learn not to be caught in stories, to know a story as a story, a story in your own mind is kind of like a piece of virtual reality. Maybe it's the original virtual reality. I was reminded the other day yesterday of the Lily Tomlin quote, reality is the leading cause of insanity for those people who are in touch with it. So we might as well just go off in stories. Sometimes it's safer.

So we simplify, we understand that role of stories and we quiet them down. And that's not an easy thing to do, but we learn not to be caught by them, trapped by them, distracted by them. We learn how they just have to avoid having them cover over some of the depth of us, the fullness of us, the richness of being a human being, the full, kind of a fuller potential of being alive that's represented by the seven factors of awakening. And then when those become simpler, then we see that there's something deeper knot, maybe it's a tighter knot, around the kind of ways in which we construct self, me, myself, and mine. And for the Buddha, he wanted to point to these five different bundles as places where we... These very simple... The place where it's a lot of stories would be in the fourth bundle with the fabrications.

But then there's simpler ones, in a sense, but they're often tied to stories anyway, like appearances. How we appear is usually connected to some big story. I had this wonderful experience for me when I was 19. I traveled through Morocco with a couple of friends, and I'd never been as a kind of an adult on my own in a traditional... It was fairly... Lots of Morocco back then was still living as they had done for a few hundred years. And it was wonderful to walk around the streets and be there and see the culture and...

But after I was there for a while, I felt something strange in my brain. I felt a kind of lightness or openness or some kind of ease in my brain that, what's that little thing going on in there? So I was kind of strange. And it took me a while to kind of, oh, what's going on? I feel this walking around in Morocco. And I finally realized it was my relationship to what in Buddhism we might call appearances.

The men back then in Morocco, most of them were yalabas, these kind of like gowns, head-to-toe kind of robes. And I had no context for understanding what kind of social position they had, what kind of work they had, what kind of politics they had, what kind of interests they had. And I realized that back in the United States, I was making a lot of judgments about people because of their appearances. That person's a jock, that person's certainly that party, or that's been to this political spectrum, you know, just all kinds of things. And it was almost automatic to see someone and for that operating my mind. And so there's a lot of this going on.

And so when I came to Morocco, the ease I was feeling in my mind, was I couldn't do it, and I wasn't doing it. Wow, this is different. So that was a first lesson I had about how there's a creating of self, other people's selves, my view of them, through appearance, being caught in it. And so when I saw in America, I wasn't just that person's something or other, but there's a whole story of what that meant and my relationship to it and how to treat them, and the stories just grew. And so to quiet that attachment, those views, those holding on, assigning certain kind of meaning to appearances... assigning meaning and value and identity to sensations, to have ideas, concepts that we carry with us that are then applied.

Many of these to ourselves, that's the main area to look at, sit quietly, and we see we're still having these ideas. I'm pretty confident that once upon a time, none of you were meditators, and it didn't occur to you to be a meditator, Or it never occurred to you to consider yourself a meditator. But now, some of you might occasionally think of yourself and introduce yourself to someone. I'm a meditator. It's fine. It can be innocent. No entanglement.

It's just kind of maybe it's a public service. It just explains a lot about you without telling a big story. Just tell. And, but is it... So simple. I'm a meditator, therefore I should be a certain way. I'm a meditator, therefore, therefore that, you know, a meditator is such a kind of person. I'm a meditator and so it's important to be that way. I'm not going to get any other... That's my claim to fame.

So these ideas, you know, to be a meditator is something, and so we attach to that, and we suffer because of that, or we have delusions of grandeur because of it. But this is relatively not a whole story, it's just, oh, I'm a meditator, and meditators have meditation shawls, and I

don't have one, so that's a problem. So then, and so these simple ideas, but as we meditate... that movement of having these movements of holding on, building a self, constructing a self, having these views and ideas, they also get quiet, quieter and quieter. And we're not doing that anymore. And we start seeing that, also that as we get quieter, as the movement I said before earlier, is that at first there's us experiencing the whole body, And that's okay to say that, but as mind gets quieter, there's no whole body anymore. Then there's all these body parts.

But then there's not just body parts, there's just the elements that are there, the sensations that are there. And it's completely appropriate in certain contexts to let the mind become quiet enough to no longer think about oneself as a meditator, as even having a body as a whole. but to kind of get simpler and simpler. And the simplest is not just sensations, but when the mind gets really quiet, really still, what it turns into is not the sensation, but the activity that's happening with the sensation, the sees-it coming and going, the rising and passing. That's a much more basic, simpler perception or relationship to our experience, than seeing it as being pressure or pain or pleasure, or as hot and cold, or all kinds of things.

There's nothing wrong with seeing it that way. It's part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* to do that. But as the mind gets quieter and the mindfulness gets sharper and clearer, this gets really simple. The mental activities get calmer and calmer, with the mind's eye getting clearer and clearer. And it's so simple. It's just things arising and passing. So kind of a parallel to that is a simplification of stories that produce the hindrances and such things.

And then there's simplification around the identity issues and no longer being concerned or caught up in ideas of me, myself and mine, because that's a little bit abstract. That's a little bit requires a more active mind to have those kinds of thoughts and those kinds of concerns. And that gets quiet. And then what's quieter than that is to just see very simply into the present moment. You're here, and you start seeing the building blocks of direct experience from which we build these big edifices of concepts, ideas, and stories. And the fundamental building blocks, and from one perspective, is the eye sees. And what it sees in the present moment is one building block.

What it hears, what it tastes, what it smells, what's touched and felt by the body, what goes on in the mind that the mind sees and knows. And so at some point, because of becoming calm and settled and undistracted, we stay close to this very basic level of sensory experience. There's, so we see that there's the eye in a sense, There's a meeting of the eye and the object there, the appearance that appears. And then at some point, before things have gotten super simple, it's still a little bit complicated, is we see, we know, we recognize that I see something.

There's the eye, I see something. And kind of like in between those two things, there's a knot, there's an entanglement. There's a preoccupation about it.

There's a wanting or not wanting. There's doing something, making it into something, expecting something. The mind gets caught in it, knotted in it. And that's the word that the Buddha used. It's usually called a, translated as a fetter, which I don't know how many times you talk about your fetters. You know, But the word also means, can be translated as knot, or an entanglement. We don't innocently just see that we get entangled in it.

So I'm looking down now, that *zafu* is kind of now not in the place it was before. But in front of it now is one of those rectangular brown cushions. So, you know, cushion. I see a cushion. But it's not that simple. That cushion, I think it has just the right thickness. Maybe I should get that cushion. Maybe I should buy one like that. I think having those at home would be really cool. I wonder what else I can do with it.

And maybe I could use as a backrest and that cushion would be great to have. I think it's so nice that it's brown, it's associated with IRC. I think my status at IMC will go up if I get associated with IRC and if I have a brown cushion like that. It'll be great. I'll be famous. So that's an example of being knotted up. The knot has been created, and I'm caught up and involved with that, seeing that object. Same with what we hear. Maybe what we smell and taste. Body sensations. They're all kinds.

And so it's really something to watch and be able to see. It looks like I'm caught. I've stopped. Reality keeps flowing, and now I've stopped for that cushion. It's kind of like time stops in some ways, or it's kind of a metaphor I like is that we're watching the river flow, and we really like the river. So it'd be good to have a souvenir and take part of the river home. So you get a bucket, and you scoop up a big bucket full of water, and you go down and tell your friends, I have the river here. You have a bucket of water, you don't have the river. Right? But, you know, that you've... So when we get entangled, we kind of, it's kind of similar. We've stopped the flow of reality and we're caught and something stops. Something stops in the mind.

The fluidity of the mind to just flow and move and stay connected to the next moment and fresh for the next moment and here. Letting each thing appear and disappear so we can be there for the next appearance and coming and going. So this text where the Buddha says, he says, here, I love it that he says here. Here, one knows the eye, one knows appearances, and one knows the knot that arises in dependence on the two. So there is that cushion, there's my eye. I probably wouldn't be preoccupied with that cushion without them kind of dependent. They don't cause it for me, but my preoccupation is dependent on those both existing.

And this word dependence is a very significant Buddhist kind of concept. And one of the things that can start happening when we do this practice is we start seeing the dependent arising of things. We see that Gail talks about brown cushions, and now you have your own fantasies about brown cushions, and how wonderful it would be for you to bring it home. And dependent on Gail talking about brown cushions, now you're thinking about them. Yeah, you wish he didn't. Or if there's a bird that has a nice tweet outside, and depending on that, you see there arises in the mind a desire to have a bird as a pet. It'd be nice to have that sound at home.

You weren't planning to have that thought. You know, it wasn't like you were quite there ahead of the thought with, you know, let's have a good thought about getting a pet. They just, they just, for some reason, just welled up that thought. That thought was dependent on that bird song that you heard. So there was a sensation, hearing, and a thought arose in the mind. If you're really there watching it, if you're not watching carefully, you're just maybe entangled and caught up, and you're already racing ahead about all the things you have to do to get your house ready for the bird and... and how are you going to go on YouTube and learn about birds, and what a great birdkeeper you're going to be, and you'll be famous all in one minute. This whole inner world landscape kind of swirls up.

But you could also say, sit there very quietly, hear the sound, and see that this thought, I should have a bird at home, just arose without any, without you doing it. There was no one else, but it wasn't intentional, it wasn't planned. It wasn't something that you had control over, something you chose to do. It just seemed to arise. There can be sometimes these thoughts in the mind, the mind has a mind of its own. And so out of the blue, the mind can have a new thought, maybe an original thought. Maybe you've suddenly realized... invented a new flavor ice cream no one's ever had before.

So that's just, the mind does that. But now you feel that your body is salivating, thinking about, you know, we should have ice cream at IRCE. And there's, you know, there would actually be a much better retreat center if every supper had ice cream as part of it. and you can start feeling hungry. So, depending on this thought about ice cream flavor that maybe just rose freely, it had an impact on your body. And you see the dependent relationship. If you're really, really quiet, you can see sometimes that there's no self-needed. Some of this stuff just arises, boom, boom. And if it just goes, rise, boom, this comes. Sometimes the mind, sometimes the body, Boom, boom. You're just kind of flowing along. You don't have to be involved in it. Then you're back with your breathing again.

Or you can see that there's a little tightness up and little entanglement, a little wanting, a little

being for it, being against it. The knot doesn't have to be a big thing, but we are, oh, what a great thing to think about a new flavor ice cream. I mean, maybe I should refine the recipe before the end of the sitting. And so then we're starting to get more and more entangled. So this process of simplification, quieter, stiller, allowing the mind to settle, I believe that in spite of all the tremendous desire and force to think and want to think and fix and make and plan, and that goes on in the mind... I think if you're really careful, really sensitive, quiet to sense and feel this mind of yours, you'll feel that it wants to go to peace. You feel that it doesn't want to work so much. You'll feel that it's, you know, it's tired maybe from all the decades of behaving one way, thinking, thinking, thinking.

There's almost like there's a desire, the similar desire to that ball, That, you know, we can say the ball wants to roll downhill because it feels a pull of gravity. There's something very similar in the mind. There's the pull of gravity of peace, the pull of gravity of non-entanglement, the pull of gravity of no longer putting in the work to be caught and involved in thinking and planning and judging. And there's something in the mind that wants to go in that direction. Right. And so to be, at some point as we keep meditating, you start feeling that natural pull in that direction. And so things get simpler and simpler.

And at some point we just see the knots. We see that very, all that's left maybe of attachment is this very simple for and against. It's very simple wanting and not wanting. We're not making a big story about it. We're not making a self out of it. But in a very raw, almost amoeba-like place, we're still caught in being for and against pleasure, for and against pain, for and against just cushions. Just a little bit here.

So it's start seeing these things arise dependently. One thing arises, another thing arises. Even getting entangled, being caught by something, when the mind is really quiet, You see, it's almost as if, or it's really like, I mean, the experience of it is that you didn't do that. You can see it just arose. No self-needed. You can make a self out of it. Look at me. I'm the best entangler in the world. I do it real. If I'm going to get entangled, I'm going to do it well. Or just the cushion, seeing it, wanting it. or even more basic, not even wanting it, but feeling the leaning forward in the mind, reaching forward to the mind, you know, wanting. But there was no you doing it. It just, I mean, of course it's you, but there was no intentional you. There was no purposeful you. There was no... that you weren't choosing to, or you weren't like planning it. It's just, it's almost, it feels like it just arises without being you doing it. Or it can feel like you're the one doing it, for sure. Okay, there I'm attached. So, but it gets very simple.

So that's the movement of the practice on many different ways that Buddha teaches all this, is a movement towards simplification. And here this is about the simplest you can get. And

so in terms of the eye, I'll read the whole passage here. One knows the eye. One knows appearances. One knows the knot that arises in dependence on these two. It doesn't say one knows how one gets oneself knotted up. That's complicated. It just says one notices, one knows there's a knot. No self-reference to anything. Don't have to make any self-reference at this point. It's just a knot, just an attachment. It's very forgiving. It's very generous to just see an attachment as just an attachment without making a story about what it means about you or a story about what it means about your meditation. or a story of what should happen and shouldn't happen. It's just a knot. It's just an attachment. It's very simple.

Then it goes on to say, who knows the arising of a knot that had not yet arisen? So you're sitting peacefully minding your own business, quietly meditating, and you see you get attached. You start clinging, start grabbing... You grab onto some thoughts, some ideas, the image, something, everything. Between you and the thing, now there's an entanglement. And it's worth emphasizing again, the teaching here is one knows the arising. There's something very significant about being able to be right there to see when something arises, when it begins. Because it's a little bit easier to not take it so seriously. because we haven't gotten caught in it. We haven't started making stories and having a complicated relationship with it. It's still a level where it can seem insubstantial or seem light or seem not so powerful or not so solid. And we know there was a time before. So we know, at least theoretically, in theory, this doesn't have to always be here. We don't have to get into the delusion of permanence. I'm going to be stuck this way forever now.

And then it goes on to say, then one knows once it has arisen, the abandonment of the knot. So remember, it doesn't say to abandon the seven factors of awakening. The seven factors awakening, and the abandonment here also has no self connected to it. It doesn't say one knows or not, and now get busy abandoning it. You should let it go. Faster the better. Be a good letting go. Be a really good letting goer. It doesn't say that. It says something much, much, much more profound, where you're not the agent of the change. Maybe we can say it's the deep mind, or it's reality. There's something about just really seeing clearly an attachment, where the attachment dissolves, evaporates, untangles itself. And that's phenomenally inspiring to see. And it doesn't reinforce ideas about you being the agent of making everything possible, being in control. being responsible, the one who has to always do things. It's really freeing to know that there are other benevolent forces in here. And one of them is that if there's tension, the tension can relax simply in the gaze of awareness, simply knowing it and being present when knows it's abandoned.

And I don't know why, and the word abandonment was a strong word, it isn't simply one

knows it goes away, that it disappears. But one also knows that you're no longer enamored with it. You no longer believe in it. You're no longer committed to attachment. You see it go and you say, that's great, it's gone. I hope never to pick that up again. This is a really healthy thing. It's known... And so there's a kind of not just that it disappears, but there's a feeling that you're no longer stand behind it. You're no longer committed to that. It might happen again, but something really has shifted. And then one knows how an abandoned or not does not arise in the future. One knows how it does not arise in the future. Maybe because you're free. Maybe because you're at peace. Maybe. Maybe because the seven factors of awakening are supporting you, and you know there's a better game in town. You know there's a better alternative option. You know that attachment makes things worse. And just that knowledge, maybe, you know, then the attachments don't arise. You see a cushion, and it's just a cushion. No attachment needed.

So then it goes through and says exactly the same thing. Next is the ear. Hear, one knows the ear, one knows sounds, one knows the knot that arises independence on these two. One knows the nose, one knows smells, one knows the knot that arises independence on these two. One knows the tongue, one knows taste. One knows the knot that arises independence on these two, one knows the body. One knows tangible objects. One knows the knot that arises in dependence on these two. One knows the mind. One knows mental activity. One knows the knot that arises in dependence on these two. One sees its arising, all these things. And one knows its abandoning. We know its abandonment.

It's not easy and automatic, but that's why we hold our attachments with love, with care, with gentleness. We can let go sometimes. That's okay a little bit. It's possible to try to let go harshly with animosity, to hate something so much you want it to go. It's possible to let go with a lot of greed, strong desire for something. Those strategies don't work very well. This whole other strategy requires a kind of letting go of free activity or agency or having things as you want them to be. But having the patience, just let's just be present for it. Let's make room for this clinging, this attachment, this fear, this hurt, this way and this whole complex of things that's so difficult. Let's just be here. Breathe with it, feel it. Let it have its time in the sun of awareness. Get to know it better, because inherent in any ways that we get knotted up is the movement to relax. Just like if you make a fist really tight, left to itself, the fist will loosen up. You have to kind of reassert the tightening all the time. There's a way in which knotted stomachs were knotted in fear are being reinforced, you know, by stories, by attachments, by all kinds of things. It's partly why they persist sometimes for decades. But if you're really there, tender, caring, patient, and learn how to hold those attachments

in the gaze of a kind eye, you might then notice that it itself has a desire to be free. It itself has a movement towards letting go. And because you're watching it so simply, you're not reinforcing anymore the holding on. You're learning to get out of the way and not to reinforce. And by getting out of the way, just seeing it, leaving it alone in this very simple way, you might see the abandonment of it.

And you might see and understand the tremendous value of this kind of way of being mindful. The tremendous value of kind of getting out of your own way, kind of value of no longer being caught up in, being the agent of change, being the doer, being the, no longer needing to get caught up in judgments about things, judgments about yourself, good and bad. There's something phenomenally wonderful about the power of attention that just holds what's there, even something which is difficult. and allows something deep in there to kind of... the... sometimes it's called the self-liberating impulse of everything. There's a saying in Chinese Buddhism that something like awakening is found in the midst of everything. Awakening beckons us. Liberation beckons us. Calls on us here, come here, come closer. Be here with us. Hold it carefully. There's awakening here, but not on your time, not on your schedule. But it has to be on your shift when you're present in this wonderful, non-reactive way.

So this process of simplification can be supported by each of the seven factors of awakening. It can actually make it easier to be willing to simplify, because we have this wonderful alternative that gives us confidence, support. This is for being present, for being simple, for being here. Of course, it's possible to get entangled with the seven factors of awakening, but it's also possible to have them be there as a wonderful kind of nutriment for the practice. Yes, this is good. Stay here. They're competing, and they're all really helpful. Mindfulness is helpful. Clarity of discernment is helpful. Having a vitality in the practice is helpful. Having joy, well-being, pleasure, rapture is helpful, generally. Hopefully, tranquility is helpful. *Samādhi* is very helpful. There's real stilling, quieting, gathering, focusing of attention. Equanimity is pretty mere, pretty mere help. So we can just let's see what's there in a very simple, ordinary way. And having the help of some of these factors of awakening makes it kind of rich and not boring and kind of gives us a feeling and a flavor a sense that this is so good to do this, so helpful to be here for it. And maybe it could give you the sense that the abandonment of detachments, the letting go of attachments, the giving away of them, is not something you have to be frightened about. There's something very profound that will catch us, even as you disappear in the process. And over the next day, if you do have a healthy opportunity to let go of some things, let go of your thoughts, something, maybe, just maybe, you can do that letting go and simultaneously let go into the practice. Keep coming back to the practice.

Thank you.