

Freedom From the Bundles - Cultivating Our Inner Capacities

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Good morning, everyone. And I have one announcement. We have an... I'm hosting a conversation this Saturday morning at 9 a.m. That's going to be on the Sati Center's programs. And it's a conversation with two Middle Eastern Buddhist teachers, peace activists. Both live in Israel.

One is Palestinian and one is Israeli. And each of them teaches, as Buddhist teachers in our tradition, has their own Saṅgha: one Palestinian Saṅgha and one more Israeli. They are friends, so they've been quite connected through all the ups and downs in the Palestinian and Israeli challenges over these last decades. I'm going to host a conversation between them, with them, that they have their own perspectives of what's happening in Gaza, in Israel, Palestine. What they're primarily interested in is to share a little bit, talk a little bit about what it's like for them personally. As Buddhist teachers, as people caring for their communities, they were so impacted by all this, as opposed to coming with big declarations that are divisive.

If you're interested in attending that, it's going to be on Zoom. You go to sati.org, and there you can sign up to register so you can get the Zoom link. It seems a little bit significant, given the timing of this on October 11th, four days after the anniversary of October 7th. And just this week, where some kind of maybe a provisional peace is being ironed out for Gaza. So it seems like a very significant time to hear their voices.

So for this morning's talk, it's a follow-up from last week's talk about the five bundles. What I talked about last week is that there are the teachings of the Buddha. He talked about how we make bundles of attachments. A few of us may occasionally just have one or two attachments. But most people have collections of them. Maybe they don't all operate all at once.

The ones that Buddha was particularly concerned with were the attachments to identity, to attaching to defining oneself by particular, in one of these five different areas. We gather attachments. The first is to what is called appearance, *rūpa*. Appearances mean any kind of appearance that we take in through the eyes, through the ears, through our senses, in a sense. The second is sensations. The third is the concepts, the ideas in which we see ourselves through and the world through.

The fourth is the fabrications that the, I call it the surface mind, the factory mind, pumps out all kinds of stories that might have little to do, or maybe sometimes nothing to do with reality, and sometimes are based on confusion and delusion, that also go into the construction, the fabrication of self-concepts, self-attachments. The last one is usually called consciousness in English. I call it cognition. Some people have translated this word, *viññāṇa*, as intelligence. Some kind of attachment to something a little bit more nebulous: consciousness, intelligence, cognition. So I want to...

The way that these teachings have come down historically, it seems like in the earliest strata, in times of the Buddha, these things were simply presented or taught in the way I said. There are particular ways, bundles, that we get attached to self, or bundles of attachments in these five categories. But they are not used to define the human being. As the Buddhist tradition continued, it developed this idea that these five bundles actually characterize the human being. This is what human being is. And it takes the form of a kind of teaching that says, there is no self. What there is is these five bundles.

If that's what we are, then what we are is attachment. And so then it's kind of a negative thing, and the idea is to get rid of all the attachments, which means get rid of yourself. In fact, in later Buddhism, there was this idea that you only attain final liberation after you die, because that's when there's no more bundles left. As long as you have a body, you're kind of built into it as that this is who we are. But this was a later teaching that arose, and it led to a kind of, sometimes a kind of a very negative attitude towards the human life.

One of them takes so that when the Buddha, and this ancient says, it's this dramatic language, that we should destroy these five bundles, he's simply saying we should end these five painful ways that cause a lot of suffering by which we get attached. Right. A few of you might have had, once upon a time, big enough, strong enough, deluded enough attachments that you kind of wish they had ended sooner than they did. So destroying it may be a strong language. But when the five bundles came to be seen as the human being, destroying them became like, what? This is really a kind of a world-negating religion.

So in the time of the Buddha then, there was a corollary to the five bundles. There was a

positive alternative. One of those, a number of them, the simplest one to see, that kind of the opposite kind of corollary is something called the seven factors of awakening. These are these really good positive states, states that course through us, that can fill us, that are awareness itself: mindfulness, clarity, sometimes called investigation, vitality, joy, tranquility, unification of mind, sometimes called *samādhi* or concentration, and equanimity. What's interesting about these, the Buddha says, these states we want to evoke, go, develop, and bring into fulfillment. So here's a very different language than the language of abandoning or destroying something.

It's a language that we're allowing something to grow inside of us so it becomes full, it comes to full fulfillment. So the hindrances are to be abandoned, for example, and these bundles are to be ended, but that's not what we're supposed to do with the seven factors of awakening. The people who came to say that everything who we are is the five bundles, then they stick these seven factors of awakening into the bundle. So they have to be there. You know, and then you're kind of back in this big chaos or complicated way of understanding. But if we don't take the five bundles as who we are, we see there are particular kinds of states that if we, and there's other states that are quite positive, and the language of those states is to grow them.

The language of the fabrications is fabrication, is kind of like factory products of the mind, the surface mind. So I want to tell you a story from the Buddha's life. Many people don't realize that Buddha had a son. When the Buddha wasn't around his son, the first six, seven years of his son's life, but then after that he was around his son quite a bit, apparently. The son grew up with his father after he was about seven, and because his son became a novice monk.

There's one story that when his son Rāhula was probably a teenager, we think, he was in the morning, every morning, the Buddha would go out for alms round. He would go with his bowl into towns, villages, and as was a custom for mendicants, mendicant monastics, religious people. People would put some rice or food a little bit in their bowl, and so they have food for the day. So Rāhula went with his father on the alms rounds, going around with their bowls. He was falling right behind his father. As they were walking, at some point the Buddha, this is what the ancient records say, stopped, turned around, and told his son this, about the five bundles.

He said, the bundle of appearances is not the self. They're not yours. The bundle of sensations is not you. You are not yours. The bundles of ideas, concepts is not you. The bundles of fabricated stories is not you. And whatever this *viññāṇa* is—consciousness, cognition, intelligence—is not you. One translator translates it as not your essence. It's not your soul.

And so that's all the Buddha says.

We don't have any sense of his tone of voice or, you know, if he was glaring at his son or saying it kindly. But the story goes on where it says that his son had this thought. Having just been admonished by the Buddha, it's not appropriate for me to continue going for alms rounds. Let me go back to the monastery. So he returned. One of the Buddha's senior disciples was there. So Rāhula told them what had happened.

What later commentaries, how they understand this, is that this teenager, who may be of typical teenagers, was very concerned about his appearance, his looks, his identity. Because he probably looked a bit like his dad, being the son of the Buddha, they say that he had a conceit that he was kind of special. The Buddha picked up on that conceit. Maybe Rāhula was behind the Buddha kind of strutting, you know, with "look at me," or something. With those obvious... So in other words, he was probably caught up in, but often teenagers are kind of caught up with, with their appearance, their looks, how they're accepted or rejected by people in school and all kinds of things. So a kind of typical behavior.

The Buddha said, you know, this is not a valuable thing to do. This is not, this is the wrong direction to go, to be attached to self and who I am and what I look like and all that. So anyway, so he went back to the monastery and the Buddhist disciple said, you should be doing mindfulness meditation on breathing. That was his response to hearing this story. He gave him some advice. Instead of being conceited, practice mindfulness of breathing.

When the Buddha returned to the monastery that evening, Rāhula went to his father and said, "Can you teach me mindfulness of breathing?" which the Buddha did. He taught him the *ānāpānasati* practice, the practice, 16 steps of mindfulness or breathing. So what you see in this story is that his son was concerned with surface appearances, attached to it, surface attachments. The alternative to that is to develop the inner life. That's what meditation is developing. One of the things the meditation on breathing classically does is a condition that evokes the seven factors of awakening, these beautiful inner states.

There's a move inward to become aware of ourselves in a deep inner way, to discover a deep sense of satisfaction, wholeness, sense of completion, sense of peace that's not dependent on external looks, not dependent on whether people praise us or criticize us or not dependent on the kind of things that some people are caught up in around their building an identity, a story, a concept of, "look at me, I'm this way, I'm so great." So it's not just simply to dismiss that and leave people kind of floundering but offering a very powerful alternative to cultivate a beautiful, powerful, unified, collected inner life that is not something which is fabricated. It's not an engineering job, but rather is to tap into the deep inner capacity to grow something

from the inside out. So he didn't teach this, but this is my analysis, is that what we develop in a sense are the opposite of these five bundles.

So instead of developing the bundle of being attached to appearances, we're cultivating inner states of well-being. Instead of cultivating attachment to sensations, the Buddha in teaching meditation was teaching that there are two different sources of feeling sensations and feeling pleasure and pain or uncomfortable sensations. One source is how the world stimulates our senses. Some people are addicted to sensual pleasures. Some people are addicted to avoiding sensual pain and discomfort. Some people are preoccupied by that world, getting pleasure from the world. So we're constantly searching and looking. Since pleasures of the world are never constant, there's constant looking and having more and searching. Right?

The Buddha said there was a different source of sensations, of pleasure and pain, that are deeper in our system than what happens with the sense world outside coming into play. These are not so temporary. They're more suffusive within us. They kind of flow or glow or radiate or maybe because rather than being individual sense nerves being stimulated, maybe they're products of the flow of hormones, neurochemicals through our body that happen when we're cultivating these really nice good states of being. So there arises this different source that is not of the kind of skin contact, but for something being harmonized or being settled or being opened deep within us. A sense of inner well-being.

So it's not dependent on whether people think you're beautiful or handsome, or you have just the right this or that. The reference point for well-being is not praise or blame, but rather is this beautiful feeling that can come from the inside out. Then for ideas, concepts, attachments, bundles of concepts, the Buddha actually offered lots of concepts to live by. There, it isn't like we're supposed to get rid of all concepts, but there are concepts we can hold or have that maybe don't so easily give rise to attachment or point to another way of being. Some of them are this idea of the source of where our mental life comes from.

If it comes from the fabrication, so the factory mind, then that's often a source of delusion and confusion. But our mental life can also come from something the Buddha called, believe it or not, I've talked about this a lot lately, the womb. It's a metaphor for some place profound inside. The womb is a place where things grow. Once upon a time, each of you grew in a miraculous, wondrous way in a womb. So this womb-like growth that happens to a human being continues after we're born.

In a sense, we have the womb of our family that is essential for the growth of a child. Sometimes some of that can go amiss and something comes a little bit askew from what's with the

nourishment and the support that comes from that family womb. There's a society womb, the community womb, that are really essential to take care of this inner growth. When society and friends are not providing a healthy nourishment in that womb, what they provide is aggression, anger, hostility, delusion, greed, that can have a huge impact on the growth of a child. So the Buddha is pointing to this idea that there are profound areas within us that can be fed and nourished in positive ways.

When we think of it, the concept of there's something here for us to grow rather than the idea there's something here for us to fabricate, to engineer, to concoct and make up, it lends itself to something very different. The path of awakening, also, if you use too much the words attainment and to get, it leads to kind of like a sort of, a kind of a greed for to have some kind of spiritual states. But the Buddha used this language that is much more peaceful, much more easeful for this. This is where sometimes translators into English make choices which are maybe not close to what the Buddha meant.

One example of this I'll give you is the language of sometimes attainment of enlightenment. Sometimes that's called a breakthrough, a penetrating into the truth. That's kind of aggressive language, breakthrough and penetration. Some people have a lot of trouble with too much spiritual language, as penetrate, penetrate, which some teachers do, I've heard, in Asia. But in these translations where people use the word breakthrough or penetration, sometimes the actual Pāli word, *abhisamaya*, means for things to meet together. Sometimes by convention that's come to mean to be in agreement with something.

So you have a very different feeling if it says, you know, break through to liberation, than if it says, come into agreement, come into harmony with something. Come and meet something. Meet the liberated mind. In Vipassanā practice, it's a practice that leads to liberation, but the penultimate kind of step to liberation is something called *anuloma*. *Loma* means hair, and *anu* means with the hair. It has the same meaning in English as in Pāli as the English expression "with the grain." Rather than being with the grain of the wood, it's with the hair of the cat. Right. If you want to pet the cat, don't do it against the hair. If you want to be in harmony with cat, you do it with the hair.

So this idea that the penultimate kind of experience that brings about enlightenment is an experience where you're in harmony, you're with the grain, you're in alignment with something, as opposed to at the doors of enlightenment with a sledgehammer. You know, you're going to bust through. So it's a very different kind of language than... We have the language, let me pause for a minute. You know, it's a little bit cold. Can you turn the, I don't know why the, why the, maybe the heat is not coming on. We're just getting cold air.

So, another kind of, so concepts are actually very important. What are the concepts that we use for, for, we hold on to and get caught by. That can apply to meditation itself. Another one is the word concentration. A lot of Western meditators have gotten headaches from that word, trying to get concentrated. Another way of translating, which is closer to the original, means to gather together. So unification is used. So we're practicing unification. Unification rather than concentration. That kind of creates a very different feeling.

Some people, for some reason, the word concentration seems to evoke a lot of conceit. Positive conceit and negative conceit. I have to do this. I'm supposed to kind of do this intense thing, become concentrated, or look at me, how great I am, I'm concentrated. But I think that the word unification has a very different feeling. It doesn't lend itself too much to that kind of narrowing of the world with me, myself and mine.

Then there's stories. The fabricated stories, the ideas we have. But there are good stories. The Buddha was a big storyteller. He used a lot of metaphors. The metaphor for a unified mind, concentrated mind, *samādhi* mind, one of the beautiful ones is that of a lake, a very quiet, peaceful lake that's very refreshing and is being nourished not from water flowing in from streams or rivers or rain, but it's being replenished by a wonderful underwater spring, fountain, that's bringing refreshing water that spreads throughout the lake. That's kind of a creative story that is a metaphor. It was a metaphor for this very thing I'm talking about, for this inner life, this womb-like source, where this sense of goodness flows and spreads through our body in meditation.

Then there is this consciousness thing, this *viññāṇa*, that there's a lot of attachments to that. Some people have. Some people take consciousness as being the ultimate, the essence, and they hold on to very clear ideas. When this *viññāṇa* is understood as intelligence, some people are attached to their intelligence, to the overall working of this inner mentality. When it has to do with cognition, which is probably closer to what the Buddha meant, attachment to cognition is just a very attachment to some of the essential functioning of the mind. We make a self out of that. I am consciousness, I am my intelligence, I am my cognitive capacities.

Instead of being attached to that, the corollary for that is in meditation to cultivate a kind of a clear mind or an empty mind, a mind which is expansive and large, which you can't put your finger on. You can't, if you kind of try to grab it and hold on to it, it's like grabbing air or grabbing water. By the time you open your hand, there's just a few drops left. There's a cultivation of a state of mind that's not the same as consciousness, or infinite consciousness. But there's a state of mind which is vast, beautiful, expansive, but it's nothing. It's empty. It's an absence. What it's absence of primarily, it's an absence of clinging. The mind liberated

but through non-clinging.

So what I'm trying to convey here today is that in this ancient tradition, there was kind of two general contrasting systems of how we can live as a human being. One which is deleterious to ourselves, the system that has to do with attachments and clinging. The other that's primarily represented by meditation, but not limited to meditation, that is part of the growing, evolving development of really deep, wonderful capacities we have so that we become kind of large or full and strong and confident and present without any clinging. So it's not a matter of abandoning the world in this tradition, but rather how we live in the world. We can live in the world with a fullness of being. We can live in the world with a well-developed, well-cultivated inner life.

Part of the task of Buddhist practice is, in fact, to cultivate this inner life so it becomes full. To cultivate it, using that word cultivating, you know, borrowing it from a gardening or agricultural idea of cultivating plants, nurturing them, planting the seeds, taking care of it. But the farmer doesn't actually cause the growth, just creates the conditions for it. This idea that we don't cause this inner growth, this spiritual growth, also is a protection from conceit. We just provide the conditions. Something inside of us, which is not ourself, not the self, that's not the conceit, something inside of us, which is not me, knows how to grow. So that's a little bit of a strange kind of idea. But do we have to take everything that's within us as me, myself, and mine? Probably not.

So then the Buddha, when he came back in the evening, and Rāhula asked him, "Dad, teach me mindfulness of breathing." He gave him these steps, 16 steps of mindfulness of breathing. At the end of that teaching, teaching him, he makes this kind of unusual statement to a maybe 13, 14-year-old boy, a teen. He says, if you do this, you'll know your last breath. Why would he say that to a 13 or 14 year old? What does that mean? You'll know your last breath. Why is that significant? What do you think? Now I'm asking you a question. So do you have any ideas?

Well, I think if you're conscious enough to notice your last breath, it implies that you're conscious enough to recognize this breath and all the breaths that come after it. I see. So it's almost like an encouragement. Yes, stay with these breaths now. Very nice. Over here on your right.

My experience is that when you go deeply into the breath, you're sort of visiting the place of your last breath. I think we keep the mic a little bit longer if you don't mind. That you're visiting the breath. And that's kind of a wonderful image. Could you fill it in a little bit? Well, I've been close to people when they've been dying. You could turn it up a little bit louder. I've

been close to people when they've been dying and for this last breath. And it's so magnificent. I mean, it's just the greatest experience of the infinitude of the breath. I feel that at times, and I'm settled breathing, that there's a connection between this breath now and what occurs when we die.

So what I hear from that, you don't have to answer my question, because it's kind of personal, but what I hear from that is that you're probably not that scared of dying. No. No, not at all. And I don't see it as a tragedy or any of that American stuff. That's what's sometimes been recognized, that people who have a good experience in meditation, the idea of dying is not such a frightening thing. Thank you. So any other ideas about... Yes, over here?

Yes. What comes to me this morning, maybe tomorrow would be different, but is the idea that I can't know something if I'm attached to it. So it's really kind of saying everything, like there are two modes of living and... you know, how I was living before I came to understand the practice was, if I know, knowing is the ultimate, but there was a lot of grasping in this because I'm so... Then I get attached to being right and it's my ideas, right? But you really know something, you can't be attached to it. You know, I'm finding in... something very interesting in my work. I'm an innovator and every time I get to a place where I think I know and if I can just let myself unknow, I know better. So it's kind of like not, not again, the conceit you were kind of saying, being conceited about knowing. Maybe there is some kind of that. Thank you. That was wonderful to hear.

So from that, I interpreted for this, in terms of the story, that if the Buddha was saying, you'll know your last breath, he's kind of saying, you'll know your freedom as you're dying. So someone else? No? Oh. You have one. Yeah, yeah, please. It occurs to me that if you know your last breath, then you're really present. So there's a, to me, there could be an association with being present is so important in Buddhism, the present moment. If you know it the last time, that suggests that you've been able to be present for a lot of your life. Yeah.

One of the interesting, I think, consequences, I believe, about this practice, really strong mindfulness, recognition, presence, is you might realize as you're dying, that being present, being really mindful and present for whatever is going on in that experience is a lot better than the alternatives available. So then the question is, do you have the ability to somehow choose the best options during that moment of dying? Do you choose fear or do you choose freedom from fear? Do you choose regrets, you know, the freedom from regrets? Of course, I think the idea is, please choose the better option. But if you know it, that's one of the benefits from doing this practice, is to really develop a clearly clear connection and knowledge and knowing of what the better option is. To learn to recognize what is not a good option.

Many people are quite content to live with anger, to live with resentment, to live with anxiety, to live with greed, and be seduced by them or be convinced by them, this is important, this is the way to live, this is how it should be. But when we do this practice, we learn for ourselves. So you don't have to believe me. You'll learn for yourself the negative impact of these kinds of states, the negative impacts of being lost in distraction, lost in fantasy, and that there's a better option. If you learn that really well, then when you're seriously challenged, like for example, while you're dying, it might be very interesting for you to see what is a better option here and to develop the capacity to choose the better option rather than the one that's more deleterious.

Kevin? Maybe you'll know you're alive. You'll know you're alive. Oh, you'll know you're alive. Yes, there was a wonderful Zen priest, Isan Dorsey, who died of AIDS during the AIDS crisis. There's a beautiful, wonderful book about him called Street Zen. He was one of the more colorful priests at San Francisco, monks at San Francisco Center. Wonderful teacher. I knew him. But at some point he had AIDS. He kind of sat up and he usually had a sparkle in his eye. It's always delighted to see anybody he saw, just like everyone was like his best friend. He said, to have AIDS is to be alive. So what he was emphasizing was that you're still alive. He had this capacity to just appreciate that fully. Right. Rather than losing that appreciation because he was sick. So that was kind of beautiful thing that he demonstrated.

So, yes, here. Could the interpretation not be connected to death, but more when the notion of you falls away? When the what falls away? Notion of you. Yeah, so kind of a metaphorical death. When the death of self-concept, self-preoccupation falls away. I like that. Thank you. I love what you just said, and it made me think that the last breath would be, you're not breathing, but you're being breathed. Ah, very nice. It's also self-drops away.

So, one of the things I hope to convey through this talk is that Buddhism, or this early tradition of Buddhism that I base these teachings on, has a very positive view of the human being. Rather than a negative view of the human being, rather than this idea that everything is suffering and therefore, you know, just get out of this life. Because what hope is there if everything is suffering? That was not what the Buddha taught. He certainly taught an emphasis to really take suffering seriously, but it's because there's an alternative. There is, it was a very positive view of the inner source, the inner capacity, the inner possibilities here. I think it's a very hopeful teaching and direction to go.

It does require something from you. That is to go back to the monastery and wait for the Buddha and then ask, how do we do this practice of mindfulness of breathing? And then to do it, you know, or to do the practice. You have to practice. So may the practice be the

incubation, be the gestation of your profound capacities for peace, wisdom, and well-being. May that then spread from you into this suffering world. May we all be wonderful agents of change by the amount of goodness that radiates from us. Thank you.