

Saturday Dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

December 06, 2025

Keywords: āyatana, kāmaloka, nibbāna, Dhamma, bhikkhu,utta, loka, duhkha, Tathāgata, Kaccāna

Sense fields, that Andrea talked about at the beginning, could also mean *āyatana*. The Pāli word can also mean home or abode or refuge, field, a variety of kind of very evocative words. And using a different word for senses, Buddhist kind of way of understanding this world of ours, it's primarily defined as the world of the senses, the *kāmaloka*, sense world, that we share with animals, that we have these senses that operate. And in classic mythology, that's distinguished with worlds where the physical senses are not quite operating the way we think of them, that other things nourish people. So there's a place where there's, it's called the form world or the appearance world, where things have appearances but have no substance. And so I guess what certain deities have, they appear like deities, they have appearances, but they have no substance.

So I suppose in some ways there's no physical senses that they experience, even though they're supposed to have all kinds of pleasures. But anyway, our world is the world of the senses. Our body is a world of sense experience. It's a complicated world because we get into a lot of trouble chasing after sense pleasure, get into a lot of trouble sometimes trying to escape from difficult sense experience. But there's really no way of escaping our humanity in any kind of ongoing way. And in this teaching of embodiment that this practice emphasizes, really sensing and feeling sensations, the body, is a way of stepping into the sense world fully to embody it, to feel it, to sense it, to know it, so that the experience of it can be freeing instead of being entrapping.

It's not a turning away, but a turning into and finding the freedom there. There's, for me, a wonderful story in the *suttas* about a monk named Channa. And Channa was apparently the charioteer who drove the Buddha out of the palace when he was going to renounce the world and go off to seek his awakening. And they drove down to the edge of the country and

to the edge of the forests, and the horse couldn't go anymore. Buddha gave his horse and his chariot to Channa and said, go back. You can have these things.

Eventually he became a monk himself. But maybe because he had a childhood association, they were about the same age, grew up together. Apparently he was conceited, like he thought he was pretty special being the Buddha's friend. And he was also pretty obstinate. So apparently he didn't take well maybe to some of the rules in the monastic life, some of the things he was taught. He also apparently didn't really take in the teachings very much.

And so there were various times that he was censured for his behavior. And it's likely he's the person who at the end of the Buddha's life, he gave the most severe censuring that can be done in the monastic life. He said, he made a rule, or made a ruling, that the monastic community can no longer be in communication with him, could no longer talk to him. He was no longer welcomed. He didn't tell him he couldn't be a monk, but he no longer could be part of the community that way. So the Buddha died, and Channa probably felt pretty bad, and at some point he kind of, something awoke in him through all those years that he wanted to really be able to see the *Dhamma*, see the teachings for himself.

He was probably, you know, as old as the Buddha was, maybe 80, but he wanted to know, he wanted to see the *Dhamma*, see it for himself. So he went out one night, he got up and went around, and he had the keys to the dwellings where the monks were, these elder monks, and he kind of was waking them up or going down the aisles or something and saying, you know, please, please. May the elder *bhikkhus* instruct me. May the elder *bhikkhus* teach me. May the elders provide me a *Dhamma* talk so I can see the *Dhamma*.

Seeing is very different than understanding. So it's not an intellectual exercise. There's something about, with the mind's eye, kind of some deep inner perception, it's something very personal and immediate and clear that a person sees themselves. He'd never had that. So the monks who weren't supposed to speak to him didn't, couldn't quite do that. So they gave him, I, in a way I imagine it, they kind of maybe put their head out their doors or something, and kind of gave one of the most stereotypical, simple, basic teachings of the *Dhamma* that you could give back then as a way of just, go, you know, here it is, go.

And they said, about these five bundles, these five aggregates, they said that appearances are impermanent. Feelings, sensations are impermanent. Ideas, concepts, recognitions are impermanent. Mental constructs are impermanent. Consciousness or cognition is impermanent. Each of these five are not self. All mental constructs are not self. All mental activities are not self.

So they repeated that and then they closed their doors. And he said, but I only know this. I know that all the bundles are impermanent and not-self. I know that all mental activities are not-self. But my mind is not inspired, confident, settled, or resolved about the quieting of all mental constructs, the giving up of all attachments, the ending of cravings, fading away, cessation and *nibbāna*.

So not only does he realize that he hasn't seen the *Dhamma* in all these years, he hasn't done the inner work. There hasn't been the inner change that the *Dhamma* is pointing to. And he has not only that, but his mind isn't inspired to do it. You know, it's one thing for these poor *Dhamma* teachers to say, you know, that you can get liberated. You know, it's possible. You can get around to it if you put your mind to it.

Liberation's good. *Nibbāna*, after all. *Nibbāna*. And somehow that kind of *Dhamma* teaching like I just gave probably doesn't inspire you. It probably doesn't fire up the engines and get resolved, like, this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to get serious now. This is what I'm going to center myself on.

So he realized that he wasn't inspired, confident, settled or resolved. And then he lists these five things, five, six things that are kind of a definition of attaining the ultimate goal: quieting of all mental constructs. Some of you have had a lot of mental constructs this week. Just imagine if they, all these thoughts and ideas and stories, quieted, got really peaceful. You might have tasted a little, had a little taste of it.

The giving up of all attachments. The word giving up is really great because in English, I think it originally meant to offer up on the altar. And the Pāli word also has the word generosity in the word of relinquishment, giving up. So giving up all attachments, all clinging, the ending of craving, the fading away, the cessation, *nibbāna*, the release. So my mind is not inspired by any of this, which you're supposed to be if you're a monastic. But he knows he doesn't have it.

Instead, anxiety and clinging arises. My mind is spinning. For someone who sees the *Dhamma*, it does not occur to ask, who then is myself? But that's what's happening to him. He's not really settled. He knows that there's no self supposedly, but he's still caught up in the world of self, and who am I, and what am I?

So he asks himself, so that I can see the *Dhamma*, who can point out the *Dhamma* to me? Who is it who can help me? So this man is now distressed that the Buddha is dead, he's been excommunicated kind of. He's old, and something has gotten to him like, I better focus on this. It's time. I need to see the *Dhamma*. I need to do this work.

But who can help him? All the monks are closing their doors on him. But then it occurred to him, at this other monastery, is Venerable Ānanda. Venerable Ānanda can point out the *Dhamma* so I can see the *Dhamma*. I have a lot of love for Venerable Ānanda. Why don't I visit him?

I have a lot of love for Venerable Ānanda. Why don't I go visit him? Then Venerable Channa, having set his sleeping place in order, and taking his bowl and robe, set out to find Ānanda. Arriving, he exchanged friendly greetings. Taking a seat to one side, Venerable Channa said, at one time, recently, I was living this other place, and I went around to the monks and asked them to, you know, who can teach me the *Dhamma* so I can see the *Dhamma*? He recounts all that happened, including that it occurred to him that I have a love for Venerable Ānanda. Why don't I visit him?

So he told the whole story. And then he says, may Venerable Ānanda instruct me? May Venerable Ānanda teach me? May Venerable Ānanda provide me with a *Dhamma* talk, so I can see the *Dhamma*. So he's pretty earnest now. He's pretty sincere.

And Ānanda says this, and this is kind of a turning point. This really does a turning for Channa that he hears this from Ānanda. On this matter that you're bringing up, I am certainly delighted with Venerable Channa that you have opened up and cut through your obstinacy. Listen, Venerable Channa. Give ear, Channa. You can understand the *Dhamma*.

So first, this man that Channa loves is delighted that by this change of heart, he expresses that delight. And he expresses that he believes in Channa, believes that he can do it, he can understand it. And then, thinking to himself, Venerable Channa thought, it seems I am capable of understanding the *Dhamma*, and a great rapture and delight sprung up in the monk. Someone believed in him. Someone thought you can do it, you can understand, and that inspired him. That was meaningful for him.

This is a person who was probably on the edge of the monastic life much of his life because of his, whatever was going on in his mind and his heart that didn't quite fit into the flow of the life that was expected of them all. It must have been, maybe it was hard for him, but then somehow someone believed in him. So then Ānanda was going to offer him teachings so that he could see the *Dhamma* for himself. And Ānanda then repeats something he heard the Buddha teach many years before, to a monk named Venerable Kaccāna, Reverend Channa. In the presence of the Buddha, I heard and took in this instruction to Venerable Kaccāna, Kaccāna.

Mostly, this world relies on the dyad of existence and non-existence, that things exist or they don't exist. That's how people see the world. But, when one sees with right wisdom the arising of the world as it comes to be, the thought, non-existence of the world, won't occur. When one sees with right wisdom the cessation of the world as it comes to be, the thought existence of the world won't occur.

The word for world, *loka*, which can mean, kind of, has kind of the same double meaning as the English word world. It means both kind of the wider world that we live in, but also the personal world of our own experience. Sometimes we say that person is living in his own world or her own world or something. But all of us have our own direct personal experience of being alive, of being in this world that shouldn't be discounted. There's no way around it. We have our senses, our eyes, our ears, if we're lucky.

We have all these capacities for sense contact. And together with thoughts and ideas and constructs, that's kind of the world that we kind of navigate. Our mind is reconstructing the world all the time, so we can kind of get around without bumping into each other too much. So the world. And so that's the world, the world of direct experience. And if you see that the world of direct experience comes into being, you can't say it's not there.

But if you see it ceases, you can't say that it permanently exists. Earlier, now I heard the dogs barking. I can't say that the sound didn't exist when I heard it. But I can't say now that it exists, now that the sound has stopped. It existed for a short ephemeral period of time. It came and it went.

And to see the coming and going of things is a lot easier if the mind is quiet, if the mind is not preoccupied with thoughts, ideas, desires, aversions, doubt, not preoccupied with fear and sadness and doubt, just settled and open and available to sense and feel the river of changing experience. Kaccāna, the Buddha continues in this teaching, Kaccāna, mostly this world is attached. Most people are attached. But if toward those mental attachments, one does not cling to it as this is myself. So this is a kind of subtle thing. It's not saying don't cling to self, but if you have an attachment and you see this is not, if you know it's an attachment, to claim that this attachment is me, this is my attachment.

And it's pretty easy to do because these attachments by nature are sticky. And they often, what makes them sticky, is the very idea that it's me, myself and mine. It's all about my whole, what I want, what I need, what I don't want. And so this whole kind of process of selfing and me-ing that we live in, and then we make that attachment is me. I need this. I have to have it.

I can't be somehow right or good or safe or something, unless this happens, this has to happen. I'm defined by it, by the attachment and having it. So it says, but if to the world is attached, but when these attachments occur, if one does not cling to any of them as this is me, then one will have no doubt that the suffering of self, the suffering of clinging, of attachment, when arising is clearly arising, and that that suffering, when ceasing, is clearly ceasing. So if suffering arises, you can't say it doesn't exist. But if the suffering ceases, you can't say that it keeps existing. And if you see that suffering arises and passes relatively quickly, maybe it's intermittent or inconstant, it comes and goes and comes and goes.

If I'm sitting here and I'm thinking about how good it would be to have some coffee at 8 p.m. this evening, that would be really good for me. I mean, that's just so pleasant and nice and cozy. It's kind of cold over there in the house. Coffee at 8 p.m. will be really cozy. Oh, but I can't do that because then I won't sleep and that'll be terrible.

And what am I, oh, you know. I want, but I can't. And once again, life is being hard on me. Why can't life provide me what I want? It's such a simple thing. And, you know, I'm going to protest and get angry, and, you know, this is terrible.

And I can write a letter to the managing directors of IRC. He says, there's a problem here at IRC on coffee. That's one thing, right? I can make a whole, I can have a whole drama that builds around this whole thing about, or I might have an idea like that, oh coffee would be nice. Oh, I'm kind of attached to it. Oh, look at that.

There was a desire arose. There was a little bit of attachment arose. But I just noticed that it's eight o'clock and maybe I have to put out breakfast. Oh, but I'm attached to my coffee. Let me think about the coffee. Oh, but I really need to pee first.

Let's get back to the attachment. The one that says, ouch, you know, this hurts, it's clinging, I'm just getting tense, you know. And so, you know. But it turns out, if you really pay very, very, very careful attention, you're actually really bad at clinging. Because it gets interrupted a lot. Yeah, all kinds of things, you know.

You have to check the news on the iPhone. Maybe you have an email. You know, all kinds of things are more important than always thinking about that coffee at 8 p.m., even though it hurts so much, you want it so much. After a while, you just remember it's a principle. After a while, it's just a principle that I'm suffering. Oh, it's so terrible.

I'm suffering. What was it I was suffering about? Oh, the coffee, yes. And so what I'm trying in a silly way to say is that if you're paying very careful attention, you see that suffering is not constant. It's not solid, though I know it can feel that way. I know how hard it can be.

It can just feel like, no, this is it forever. But this is how *Dharma* practices. If you can quiet the constructs of the mind, become settled, trust, deeply trust, settling into this moment to be present for whatever arises, whatever is given to you, whatever is here for you, your fear, your sadness, your doubt. Just feel it, just be it. In the fear, simply the fear. In the sadness, simply the sadness.

In the joy, simply the joy. In the knee pain, simply the knee pain. And to not make it complicated, but also not slide away too quickly. Stay long enough that you can see that it rises and it passes. Just like the inhale is not constant. If you like the inhale, just try holding it.

Never going to give it up. I got it made. That was a perfect inhale. I'm going to stop halfway through and keep it for myself. No one, not going to share it with anyone. You know, it's ridiculous.

It's ridiculous. You have to, inhale comes and it goes. It comes and it goes. And what makes breathing really nice and easeful and sometimes very pleasant is something about coming and going easily. You don't want it to be constant, only an inhale. And so the same thing with our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions.

There's a way in which being very finely attuned, aligned, centered, we start seeing that things are rising and passing and coming and going. And one of the things we see, amazingly enough, even suffering, whatever that is, distress, emotional pain, clinging, is not constant, even if it feels that way. And so to see that. But the amazing thing about this teaching, it doesn't say that you shouldn't be attached. Maybe that's pretty common for people. Mostly this world is attached.

But if toward those attachments one does not cling to it as this is myself, then one will have no doubt that this very *dukkha*, suffering associated with it, when it arises, is simply arising. And that when that suffering, when ceasing, is clearly ceasing. With this, and this is a very important sentence, because you get a sense how important this insight is. With this, one's knowledge is independent of others. This, *Kaccāna*, is how there is right view.

So now you know something for yourself that's really important. If you can settle back and watch the coming of an inhale, the going of inhale, the arising of an exhale, the rising of an exhale, and you really see it comes and goes, believe it or not, that is right view. If you are attached to how your breathing is or how it isn't, and you see the attachment arises, the thought, oh, this is the wrong breath, this is the right breath I have, if you can see it arise, it might be a lot easier not to grab it. It might be easier just to let it pass through and it fades away, just like the breathing arises and passes. To begin appreciating, to notice when things

first appear, they're there, in a sense, but they weren't there just a little while ago. And they won't be there someday, some hour, some minute, some second away, to watch and see the comings and goings that we cannot see if we stay living in our thoughts, living in our constructs, our ideas, our projections.

And Buddha continues, Kaccāna, everything exists is one extreme. Everything does not exist is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the *Tathāgata* teaches the *Dharma* through the middle, that things arise and they cease. So for those of you who are at the reflection, not last night at nine, I extended this teaching. In the seen is just the seen. In the heard, just the heard.

In the sensed, just the sensed. In the cognized, just the cognized. To include in the you, just the you. Meaning whatever you are, whatever that you is, we probably don't really know any of us, but whatever that you is, can you be as, can you relate to it as simply as you do to the seen, just the seen. The heard, just the heard. Free of clinging, free of attachment, free of preferences, free of attachments, free of judgments.

Chances are you cannot do it so well. But if you can't do it so well, say you can only do it 70% well, or 30% well. That's something. Don't overemphasize your suffering, your attachments, your clinging, and then to overlay on top of them, oh, I can't do this so well, so therefore I can't do it. You might be able to look at the edges of your clinging, and see there's also non-clinging, at the edges of your suffering, and there's all this space of non-suffering.

Suffering does not fill the universe. You might be able to intuit that there's a wider space that's infinitely large, in which suffering is just a small thing, maybe big for you, but for the universe. There's a lot of space. There's a lot we don't cling to. And in the comings and goings, your clinging might not be as solid and continuous as you realize. You might be able to see yourself through the eyes of, in the you, simply the you.

And it's a little bit like how Andrea talked about the Buddha being called himself the *Tathāgata*, where the operating word is this very unsophisticated word, just meaning thus, like this. It's like you go up to the Buddha and say, like, who are you? And he says, like this. It's kind of, it's not what you're asking, but maybe it's a profound answer. Because anything else limits who he is. Anything else defines it, narrows it, narrows a scope.

But you don't use any words to define it. You say this, here, in the you, just the you. So if you're just in the you, just the you, you might see that the you, when it arises, the arising of self, the rising of identity, the rising of definition, the rising of some sense of me, to go along with this means you can see that you exist. But another way of saying it that's kind of

profound is not that you exist, but in the arising of self it confirms. You're confirmed, you're recognized, you're known. It's good to be known, it's good to be confirmed.

And with the ceasing of self, you are freed. With the arising of self, you're confirmed. With the ceasing of self, you're freed. So there's a story, there's a few stories, kind of Zen stories, that point to the simplicity of just in the seen, just the seen, and how profound it is. One story is that two Zen students were discussing their Zen masters, respective Zen masters. And the first one says, oh, my teacher, he's fantastic.

Can fly through the air, read people's minds, walk on water, see into the future. Really great. The second one says, oh, my teacher, when she walks, she just walks. When she eats, she just eats. When she sits down, she just sits down. The first one said, your teacher is really the greatest, the greatest.

That's fantastic. Because the first student understood where the *Dharma* is going. The second Zen story is there was some kind of shaman in the town in China who could read people's minds. He was out strolling along the town, the river going right through the middle of the town. So he was strolling along the river, and there were boats, the sailboats and rowboats that were doing their commerce or something on the river. And then coming down the other direction, down the side of the river, and he was out for a stroll as well, was the local Zen master.

And so the shaman said, ah, I'm going to read his mind, you know, just show him, you know, how great I am or something. So they got closer and so the shaman was going to do his magic, his thing of reading the mind. And he looked into the mind of the Zen master and he screamed and ran away. So someone kind of went after him and said, what happened? When I looked into his mind, what I saw was that river with the sailboats and rowboats going gently up and down the river, taking care of their commerce or what they're doing.

He was expecting to see something very personal, the shadow, the unconscious, the thoughts, the beliefs, the, you know, what's hidden under the mattress. I don't know what he was expecting to see, but what he saw was just what he was seeing already out there, just, in the seen, just the seen for the Zen master. In the river, just the river, just the boats. Is it okay to be that simple occasionally? What can arise for you? What can show up for you when you're not crowding the airwaves, when you haven't kind of covered the canvas completely with all your different artwork that you've been making your whole life, just adding one on top of the other?

What if you have a clear canvas? What if you have a clear view, clear open space? What ap-

pears then? What arises in freedom? Another story, there was someone who was really trying to understand, what is the self? Who's the self?

What is myself? And went to the *abbess* and said, you know, I've been looking all over, asking this question, nothing's been satisfying. And I even took great classes in philosophy, the psychology of self. But I've come and talked to you, who can answer this question? Oh, well there's an old monk here who's been practicing for decades. You have to go ask him.

Ask him, who are you? So she took him to where he was. He was out sweeping in the courtyard. Just go up and ask him. So the person goes up to this old monk and says, who are you? Now remember, he knows.

He's wise. He's seen right through it all. Who are you? He continues to sweep. That's his answer. When he's sweeping, he's a sweeper.

Maybe the self arises and is confirmed, is known, is discovered. Each moment, one moment you're distracted. And it's a funny one to be distracted because then you're both the distractee and the distractee. Which do you most identify with? Are you the distractee or are you the distractee? Or are you both?

It doesn't really matter which you are. What matters is that you see it arise and you see it pass. In distraction, simply distraction. In preoccupation, just preoccupation. How simple can you be in being present for what is here? And we've been using this word simple a lot.

It might seem like it's overly simplistic, reductionistic, minimalizing something. But I would like to suggest that it's profoundly respectful. Each thing is seen clearly for itself, maybe without, not through the lens of me, myself and mine, what it means for me, what it's in it for me, what I can get from it, what I'm supposed to be, what I shouldn't be. In the distraction, just the distraction. Respecting that. Nothing more, nothing less.

Respecting whatever life gives you, moment by moment, especially with the Latin meaning of the word respect, to look again, not hold on again, to look again. And another way that this simple attention is very respectful, very caring, very kind of honorable, is that when you can allow the comings and goings, the arising and passings of all things, then you can ask yourself the question that's meant for something deep within you, in the most settled place within you, in this comings and goings, where the ceasing gives some space, some room for something to arise. The space is not crowded. You can ask yourself the question, what wants to be born from the depths of your being? What wants to be born? What wants to grow?

What wants to be revealed? To stay simple. When you walk, just walk. When you eat, just eat. When you see, just see. In the seen, just the seen.

When you're you, just you. And maybe that gives room, space, time, for something maybe you don't even know to be born, to grow, and to be revealed. What might that be? And a reminder that we all are supposed to arise here in this hall at 7:30 this evening.