

Monday dharma talk

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One purpose of a Dharma talk is to point to the path, point you to where you can see and find and feel the Dharma path in yourself.

You can recognize it so you know where the next step is. You see the path opening up in front of you. And you see the path which is a Dharma path. We come to many forks in the road. And some of the forks are alluring or promising or might even look like the safe path, but it is not the Dharma path, and so it can lead us astray. So to be able to recognize, to stay on the path.

And it's not a path that someone else has for you. It's really a path that's in you that hopefully you recognize as such and that you want to take it, because it's you. It's some of the best things, best qualities that you have. And these seven factors of awakening, the theme for this retreat, are not just abstract ideas. They're not just, they're certainly much more than just practices. They are inner states that we can see and feel and experience.

And as such, they are really beautiful. They're some of the most beautiful things maybe you can ever experience. They're really beautiful, if you can really see them or experience them in their simplicity and their fullness. And so one way of saying this is that, in talking about the seven factors of awakening, we're pointing to beauty, something beautiful inside of yourself, that will show you the path, show you the way forward, the next step, so that hopefully you can recognize this beauty, recognize these states, more than the idea that at least this talk today is about teaching you a practice.

It's pointing to you, pointing a way that you can find your own way, find a way that you can see the step, what to open to, what to allow. One of the explanations for why it's called factors of awakening is that we're awakening out of the slumber, the sleep of attachment, preoccupation. And the very important word, we're awakening from the sleep of affliction. We live

with sometimes a lot of afflictions that are a source of a lot of suffering. And those are not the path.

We don't want to point to them as the path. We point to them so we can see the alternative path. The primary contrast the Buddha gave to the seven factors of awakening are the five hindrances. Please don't find the path in the hindrances. Don't be tricked into believing that sensual desires or aversion and hostility, ill-will, lethargy or resistance, giving up are the path. Or that ruminating about regrets or spinning out with agitation, or that doubt is the path.

They're so compelling these things, so much authority behind them. And things that are beautiful sometimes are belittled or not appreciated, or they can't be that important. So waking up from afflictions. There's a large, there's a whole chapter in the connected discourses of the Buddha on the seven factors of awakening. And it begins with a metaphor, analogy for them. And I find that the Buddha teaches often that way, that metaphors and analogies sometimes point better to things than just an explanation.

Sometimes a metaphor can be a kinesthetic feeling that's connected to it or an image, or somehow it's easier to identify sometimes with a metaphor than just a dry explanation. So I think it's a wonderful metaphor, so I'll share it with you, since this is also the introduction to the whole topic of Seven Factors Awakening. Teaching at the town of Sāvattthī, the Buddha said, practitioners, based upon the Himalayas, the king of mountains, the nāgas, nurture their bodies and acquire strength.

So not many years ago, when I was young and beginning my spiritual practice, Buddhist practice, I don't know if it's still the case, but there used to be a lot of metaphors around spiritual practice that were the metaphor of climbing a mountain. It was to climb up to the top. And there were a lot of people who said, no, no, that's a lot of work. That's not the right metaphor. But the Buddha begins this story with, now at the top of the mountain, and we're going to go down.

The path is down the mountain, not up the mountain. Okay. So based on the Himalayas, the king of mountains, the nāgas nurture their bodies and acquire strength. Actually, I looked up the Pāli. Nurture is fine. But the literal word is more like they grow their bodies. So they're growing to become bigger. And acquiring strength, the verb in Pāli, is they immerse themselves in their strength.

That's kind of a very different feeling. Immerse yourself in strength rather than getting buffed up. And so nāgas are kind of a mythical creature in India. Sometimes it's a powerful creature. Sometimes big elephants are called nāgas. Sometimes cobras are called nāgas, serpents. So

this is probably some kind of serpent, some kind of wonderful serpent that maybe their eggs were planted on top of them, and they lay a sigh up.

And that's where they're in the safe place up there. That's where they first develop. They grow and get immersed in their own strength. And we'll see, they're going to now follow a path to the ocean. It's where their home, their home or where their destination is to live in the ocean. These big sea serpents, when they have grown their bodies and immersed themselves in the strength, they then enter the pools.

From the pools they enter the lakes, then the streams, then the rivers, and finally they enter the ocean. There in the ocean they achieve greatness and expansiveness of the body. So that's the metaphor. And there are seven little steps in the metaphor for each of the seven factors of awakenings. And so they grow first based on the Himalayas. That's the foundation that they need to have.

Now it explains the metaphor, in a sense, by the seven factors. He says this way, so too, practitioners, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, and thereby achieve greatness and expansiveness in wholesome states, in beautiful states. So the Himalayas, where they develop their bodies, is based on virtue. I mean, the Himalayas are this huge, massive mountain range. And to associate virtue with Himalayas points to how important virtue is.

That's where the uphill, up the mountain work is, to become virtuous, to live a good life, a life of integrity. And really that's really a phenomenal support for finding the Dharma path. It's hard to find it if you're not ethical. So to really live a life of virtue so that something about that life begins opening something or warming something up or softening something or revealing something that's very wholesome and good and clean, that then becomes a basis for the body growing, the spiritual body, the inner body, your Dharma body.

Yeah. So these nāgas, they grow their bodies. And this is the metaphor for mindfulness. Mindfulness always points first to the body, mindfulness of the body. And it's more like we're developing a fullness of the body, a whole body awareness. We're cultivating bodyfulness more than mindfulness. And so the awareness of the body, the being present with your body to offer presence, and I'll talk more about that later.

And then to acquire strength or immerse oneself in one's strengths. And this is the factor of investigation. And it's a little bit strange maybe to associate strength with investigation. But this is a phenomenal mental capacity. It involves enough clarity of mind to really being able to see here and now what is the path and what is not the path. What is healthy for you to do,

what is not healthy. How to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome.

That's the primary definition of this investigation, to see that. And that's a strength to have that insight, that kind of clarity. And with that, those two things, a well-developed embodiment of aware, embodied awareness, that's the body side, and then a well-developed capacity of clarity, and that's the mental side. Clarity that can see, that can distinguish between what is healthy and not healthy. And with that, the *nāgas* are big enough to start making their trip to the ocean.

And so they enter the pools. And here the pool, then there's the third factor of awakening, which is *vīriya*. And that also, you know, what's the connection between pools and *vīriya*? I think again, when people think about effort or energy, they think about doing something, which is kind of precise and something you can do. There's a different kind of *vīriya*, which is more like vitality. And vitality doesn't necessarily mean you're doing something.

You can do nothing. You can just be sitting and minding your own business in meditation. And you can feel this kind of vitality, a liveliness of the body that's there. And the more embodied you are, the more you'll feel that natural vitality. And whether *vīriya* should be translated as effort or energy or strength, it's not, the word itself does not imply that you're doing anything, like applying yourself on something, like I need a lot of energy here to muscle through my whatever's happening, to really be mindful, I got to just keep trying here.

I don't know if that's what *vīriya* means. And so if that's the kind of pointing that someone's pointing to, like try harder, then you'll look for that kind of effort. But if you're pointing to *vīriya* as a kind of vitality and a kind of a vibrating strength that maybe you have after you've gone to the gym or done exercising, and you don't have to do anything anymore, you just sit down and close your eyes and you feel you're kind of humming very nicely in your body, that's *vīriya*.

And that keeps you afloat, that keeps you engaged. There is an energy that then naturally flows into the practice as opposed to trying harder. So that's the pool, entering the pool of *vīriya*. And from the pool, you enter the lakes. And here, this is the metaphor for *pīti*. And some of you know that some of the metaphor of *pīti* is this underground spring in a lake that flows up and fills the spring, the lake with wonderful, refreshing water.

But here, the *nāgas* have entered the lakes of refreshment and a place where there's more freedom to move and swim and be delighted. And so I just imagine that they're just so happy again to be in this thing, in this container, this context, they've immersed themselves in something. And this idea of immersion comes up over and over again, so much so that the famous

translator Bhante Sujato, Ajahn Sujato, he translates *samādhī* as immersion, not as concentration.

But there's this immersive quality. We're bringing all of ourselves into the picture here. We're not leading with a little guy, person in the control tower that's directing the show and bearing down or trying to, but we're kind of, there's a kind of a beginning to recognize there's something big, there's something wonderful here. Something beautiful here. There's this opening to the body.

We're opening to the body's capacity to be aware, a whole body awareness. And as we are aware of the body, then these other states can show themselves and we can see them. There's a clarity, there's vitality, there's joy. And then after the lake, one enters the streams, and I don't know how this is tranquility. But in order to make it into a nice metaphor for tranquility, I imagine it's a very peaceful, quiet, you know, little creek or stream. It's just wonderfully peaceful and a peaceful place to watch it.

But it's moving, it's flowing. That's the important thing. That we're starting to see this movement, the onward movement. We're in the flow. We're not hiking up the mountain with a lot of effort. We're allowing the current to begin carrying us. And that current has something to do with being tranquil, being calm.

And then, then the rivers, they enter the rivers. And there's other places in the suttas, a vast Ganges river at some point is really clearly everything's going in the same direction. And it's said to be a very big powerful river can be very, very quiet. Whereas a stream high in the mountains that's going over rocks and waterfalls and rapids and making a lot of noise. But once you're down in the plains of India, it's a quiet flow.

And everything's flowing in the same direction. It's carrying along everything. Everything is pointing that direction. So *samādhī* is entering into something that's a deep, kind of a movement, kind of a fullness of a movement. And that's very powerful and quiet. And finally they enter the ocean. And the ocean is equanimity here.

And some of you live or nearby and know that the ocean is not always equanimous. But when I was a kid, I did a lot of, as long as I could hold my breath, I swam under the sea. I would go, you know, I don't know how far down, six, seven feet down to the grassy sandy sea floor and clip around and look up. And partly it was, no matter how many waves were six feet up, it was always calm, that six feet under.

And I just love the calm and the peace there, the tranquility, the equanimity. Like there was nothing troubling down there. And I can look up and see the waves doing what they do up

above. And then I had to go up there to catch my breath. And then sometimes I go down again. So maybe that's what it refers to, this great peaceful equanimity that's underwater.

So again, repeating myself, one of the reasons, and one of the things I wanted to emphasize here is that on one hand, these can be seen as practices that we do, and that's valuable. On the other hand, there are states that we can begin feeling and recognizing in ourselves. And I think this is actually a very important part of Dharma practice, is not just trusting a practice, but learning to trust the state of mind, the state of body, the way that how you feel, the wholesomeness, the goodness, the healthiness, these qualities, beautiful qualities.

And so you want to be present. You want to be here. So the first one is *sati*. And one of the ancient commentaries, in talking about the *sati* factor of awakening, explains it as if a person, in the example it's a monastic, recalls the Dharma, thinks about the Dharma, then *sati* is awakened. *Sati* kind of, they get lit up by *sati*. So here, *sati* is not described as a practice they do.

Like, oh, I read the Dharma now, I'm going to really, I feel inspired, I'm going to do this. But rather, they're lit up. And there are times in our life where we're so inspired that we almost like, you know, like we're so awake, we're so present, we're so aware. Right? I've been with people as they're dying. And there's no need for me to make any effort to be mindful, to be aware, to be present.

The whole situation just, that's what's happening. There's no, it's not a practice anymore. It's just like this, the context just allows this thing to arise, surface. There's presence, there's attention, there's stillness, there's attention for this. And so I think when the idea that someone remembers a Dharma, and that lights up the *sati*, I think because they understand how important the Dharma is and how beautiful and effective it is.

And this is something that one of the most important things a person can do in their life for oneself and for the world, to understand the nature of suffering, right? And to have this amazingly beautiful path to follow that leads to the end of it. And it's not just about the end of suffering, but it's very explicit in the ancient texts that simultaneously is about developing and growing all these beautiful, healthy states that are hard to escape from love, like the Seven Factors of Awakening, and then being able to contribute to this world.

And to somehow to be motivated that in this short, precious life, this is important. This to kind of be lit up about, this is what I want to do. I really want to really, you know, resolve, discover, verify, get to the end of this amazing human possibility of freedom. This is worth. And so, it doesn't say the monk remembered the Dharma and then got into huffing and puffing to

follow the breath and get concentrated.

It says that in recalling a Dharma, *sati* was awakened. The monastic was lit up. So what is *sati*? And some of you know that I teach this, that *sati* is the first instructions the Buddha gives for *sati* is to establish *sati*. And many years ago at IMC, I went Monday evening giving the Monday evening Dharma talks. I asked people, if you're going to establish the *sati*, what is *sati*? And the most common answer people gave was awareness.

Awareness is something you can establish. Awareness is something you can abide in, which the Buddha talks about, *sati*. You abide in *sati*. You establish *sati*. You awaken *sati*. Nowhere in the sutta does a Buddha say to *sati*. Nowhere is it a practice that you do. There are practices you do to awaken *sati*, but *sati* is not the practice.

And so, *sati* is a state of, right now, in the way it's often taught, a kind of embodied awareness. Sometimes I think we over-prioritize the mind and think that's where it is. One of the first suttas I ever translated, it was a Mahāyāna sutta. The core teaching was we awaken through the body, not the mind. You know, what's the body? That's the big mind.

So when the Buddha taught the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, when he taught the path to the seven factors of awakening, he began with the first tetrad of *ānāpānasati*. So one establishes one-self in awareness, and then one is present for breathing. Then one knows who wants a breath. Those are long breath, there's a long breath. The short breath is a short breath. Breathing in long, one knows I'm breathing in long, breathing out long, one knows I'm breathing out long.

Breathing in short, I know I'm breathing in short, breathing out short, and breathing out short. And then it says, breathing in, one experiences the whole body. Right there is the body. So the Buddha is talking about how to develop *sati*, how to establish *sati*, and the foundation for doing that is to begin to experience and sense and feel the body. So first you know the breathing, then you experience the breathing with the body, and then the third step that's given is one relaxes.

We're back to this word of tranquility. Tranquilize the body. To relax the body. So that's the practice. That's what you can do. Right? You can keep coming back to knowing what's happening in the present moment. Know the breathing. Not because you're supposed to become an expert at breathing, but that's the doorway.

The knowing is a doorway to being present here. And what presence means here with *sati*, it means to, *satipaṭṭhāna*, the second part of *upatthāna*, literally means to stand near. Stand close to. And for someone who's a chaplain, that's what we do. You accompany people, you

stand near them, you're with them, with your presence, your attention.

And a chaplain is not probing with people and poking them. And, you know, they're there in the hospital bed and you show up and say, oh, you can get better if you get up and exercise now. Or you do some squats. Come on, you poke them in the ribs. Come on. I'm here to help you. You know, that's not what chaplains do.

Chaplains sit down next to them maybe and spend a lot of just their presence. They're just their presence, their attention, their care. So when the classic commentaries say what *sati* does is it stands near. It accompanies. And it's a metaphor for me, standing there, you bring all of yourselves, the whole body. You stand close to, you're going to be, you're waking up to be present for.

You're offering presence to your experience. You're offering to be aware in a way of accompany your experience. So we know that puts us in the present moment. We sense and feel that also puts us in the present moment, but also begins opening up to something wider than a mental knowing. A state of experience. Experience is something that has no, a sensing something. It doesn't have any clear boundaries.

It's like, you know, it's a little bit, it can be often kind of very diffuse boundaries. The boundaries of how your body, how breathing feels in your body. The sensations of breathing in your body are wonderful kind of things because if you're aware of the breathing in the whole breath body, it's fascinating to become aware of what the influence of breathing is beyond the edges of where you feel your body.

So begin being present. What's here? What am I feeling? What's sensing? And not sensing and trying to figure it out from the control tower, but allowing the body to have its own experience. That's where the presence is. Again, someone who's a chaplain with someone who's in, or a Dharma teacher with someone who's in a lot of suffering and pain.

It's possible to offer a lot of care for people on the phone, but it's much more meaningful to do it in person. Or your whole body is there with them. And the posture of the chaplain is important. If they lean back in a chair halfway across the room and just fold their hands over their chest and kind of look down their nose at people there in the bed in kind of a suspicious way, that's not going to really do much for the patient, for the person.

There's a way of caring. There's a way of being present with the body that allows for some kind of something to flow, something to resonate, some kind of connectivity between the person and the chaplain, the caregiver. How do you stand near to yourself? How do you offer your body to be there to resonate with the posture you have and how you sit and how you

feel and how you walk, how you eat, so that it awakens a resonance of care, a resonance of attention, a resonance that wants to wake up, or something that wants to light up, presence, attention, awareness here.

And it's good to have practices. So some people specialize, some people, there's their strength, the cognitive part of mindfulness, which is to know. Some people use mental noting, and it really helps them to stay in the present moment and gets them connected. And again, it's not so much the mental noting is important, but how it's by staying in the present moment, and we're less and less distracted, we more and more find ourselves present in a nice way.

There's then more continuity of presence of attention. Not the continuity of repeating the noting, but the continuity of just being, feeling present, feeling alive with attention. Now I'm here. I'm really here. My whole body have arrived. I'm here. So some people use noting or knowing to do that.

Some people, what works really well is the sensing, the embodied feeling of breathing or their experience, and get close and intimate with the actual sensations that are happening. And that's their avenue to find themselves in the present. Because in the presence, in the present, that these seven factors of awakening can be felt and seen and recognized. If you're not present, you never get to know them. The more you spend time thinking about the past and the future, lost in fantasy and conversations, the more you recede from the way in which you have to be in order to wake up, the way you want to be to really recognize and see and start feeling these beautiful states inside of you.

And the first beautiful state is *sati*. And then I'd like to offer you my provisional explanation of what *sati* is. It's embodied awareness. And that has a lot to do with sensing, a kind of silent sensing. And I think of awareness as something which is a kind of a, lately I like to think of it as a contemplative silence.

I think that maybe some of the first times in my life where I experience this kind of contemplative silence within me, this embodied feeling of silent presence, I don't know which was first, but I was being awake early in the morning on a body of water, a fjord in Norway, or some lake someplace. And the water is completely peaceful, and the air is completely quiet, and there's no wind, and the sky's blue, and everything is peaceful. And something shifted, like something resonated inside of me, or something shifted inside my chest and my body, where it started to hum and feel peaceful and quiet. And it felt like now I'm aware, that I'm aware from this place.

And the other place is, why I call it contemplative, is growing up in Europe. I had just enough somehow, some kind of contact with Catholic monasteries that there was somehow, in the presence of those monasteries, something shifted inside of me. And one time, very powerfully, this kind of silent hum, this silent peace, this silent goodness and wholesomeness, wholeness that the place evoked. And so I wanted, I had this fantasy of becoming a Catholic monk, and I wondered if they would accept me as an atheist.

I didn't see why they wouldn't. I thought it was about the life, not the belief. And so what form of awareness are you capable of? Yes. If the locus of awareness is your body, is your chest, is your belly, what if the center of it all is not the control tower in the head? What if the center of it all is the heart or the belly, the *hara*?

Where's the center of your vitality? Where's the center of clarity? Where are the edges of vitality? Where are the edges of clarity? Where's the center of presence? The kind of presence you would offer someone who needs loving care, loving attention. Where's the center of embodied awareness?

In what way do you stand near your experience? So you're offering this kind presence, a kind attention. And you know the difference between beautiful mindfulness and not so beautiful mindfulness. I've had a lot of not-so-beautiful mindfulness, sometimes bearing down, sometimes being in a hurry, sometimes getting all contracted and tight, sometimes doing so with a lot of judgments and crazy ideas of what I was supposed to be doing and all kinds of bizarre things.

I've been doing this so long that bets, I bet, good bet would be that you haven't done as many bizarre ways of being mindful as me. So don't worry about your ways. Probably outdo you that way. We'll line them up on the scale. You can be kind of silly, but I'm trying to loosen you up. Don't take these bizarre ways too seriously.

How can you be beautifully aware? How can mindfulness be something that you, each moment of mindfulness, you are so glad you had that moment. It was satisfying in and of itself to be present, to be aware, to be mindful. Right? To know, to feel that the way you know, the way you sense, the way you're present, is beautiful or satisfying or feels wholesome or feels, or at least it feels, it occurs to you, you know, I would do that again.

Wouldn't that be nice? Oh, that was good. Like, I'd do that again. So what do you have to adjust? How do you have to kind of approach yourself? How do you meet yourself? How do you open up here? How do you turn on, awaken, establish something like that you can abide in?

So whatever *sati* is, it's something we enter and abide in. That's the same two verbs that are used in the suttas to describe going into state of *samādhi*. One enters and abides in a *samādhi*. So *sati*, mindfulness, whatever it is, is a kind of a *samādhi*, very akin to, close to a *samādhi* and being a state, and not a practice.

There are practices to be done. Please do them. But do them with the kind of an eye for, or a feeling for, or a sense for, that the purpose of the practice, the practice, the mindfulness practice, so-called mindfulness practices, is to help you to recognize and awaken, and again beginning to abide in this state of embodied awareness, the state of presence, the state of being present here for your experience, for life, standing near.

And I think all of you have here practices that you do. I don't want to take it away from you, but, you know, practicing with the breathing, knowing it, feeling it, and then to finish the three-part step that the Buddha taught, remembering to relax. Tranquility, relaxation and tranquility. There's something about relaxation and tranquility that enables or makes room for, allows for *sati*, for awareness, for presence.

So that's what I'm pointing to today. I hope this Dharma talk can point to that in you, so that when you go about your day, the retreat, that you have that in mind so that you'll recognize when you've lost it. Because if you can recognize you've lost it, maybe you can return to it. Maybe you have enough clarity, enough discernment to say, you know, I don't think I want to stay apart from awareness.

I don't think I want to stay in this disconnected world of thoughts and ideas, because it's not as beautiful. It's not as satisfying as being really here in this experience. So I hope that what I'm pointing to is something that you can recognize for yourself. And maybe it's just a little hints. It doesn't have to be dramatic, but to some sense of a satisfying way, that just being fully here and present for your experience, standing close, being aware, being in awareness, that it feels good, and it's the path.

It's how you see the Dharma. And maybe if you have trouble staying close to the Dharma, there are two things that can maybe bring you back to this awareness. One is, remember the Dharma, the teachings, and why they're so important. And the other is you might have to remember that, or find yourself back up on top of the mountain. Take refuge in your virtue, even if you only started being virtuous last night when we did the chant of the precepts.

It's almost 24 hours. Let that be your mountain. It's good. And maybe that helps you to find goodness in being aware.