

Monday dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

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So the structure of the talks for this retreat will follow the sequence laid out in the *Upanisa Sutta*. That is, it lays out 12 steps where the step before, the condition before, the state of being before, sets the stage or sets the condition that supports the arising of the next step. And part of this idea is that there's a lot in this practice that we're not responsible for, and there is what we're responsible for. And the primary thing we're responsible to do is to show up, show up with attention. And if we show up with attention and start seeing more deeply, feeling more deeply, that sets in motion a whole sequence that can be called a path of practice, gradual unfolding or deepening. We enter the current of the Dharma current.

And so one of the things we're learning, though, in this process, is that the way we show up, the way that we know, feel, sense, the way that we experience something, the way that we turn towards it and get to know it, that itself, ideally, is simple. Ideally, it is kind. Or if being kind is too hard, ideally it is not angry or hostile or greedy or filled with any of the three kinds of conceit. That you're specially wonderful, better than everyone; that you're somehow the worst practitioner, and all this is just proving that you're just a Buddhist failure; or that anything in between, that you're... And so we complicate it. The idea is the simplicity is so important.

How simple can you show up and be present? Because if you are present with the wrong conditions, then you're turning the rudder in the wrong way. You're creating conditions for more of the same to continue. This is one of the principles of conditionality, that conditionality supports the arising of things that are similar to it. So things which are unwholesome are a condition for the growth of more unwholesomeness. The wholesome stuff is a condition for the growth of more wholesomeness.

So the idea is to be very careful with that simplicity of attention. Very, very simple. So that we're not contributing or pointing in the wrong direction. And this *Upanisa Sutta* begins with

suffering, with *dukkha*. And it might seem to be a rather discouraging beginning. It'd be nice if there was a really inspiring beginning that people just felt delighted.

It is possible to be inspired by this beginning. It is possible to realize how profound it is and how direct it is. That this is the direct path to really addressing what's going on most deeply in us, and clarifying it, and finding a way to freedom, freedom from suffering. But the way to do it is through a very human and very honest meeting of the suffering, recognizing it. And that honesty about suffering is one of the hallmarks of Buddhism, of Buddhist practice. This is suffering. I recognize it, I know it.

And it's said, since ancient times, that no one comes to Buddhism without suffering. I've had a couple of people in my life who made the claim that they came to Buddhism not because of suffering. And both of them claimed it was because of the aesthetic of it. Somehow it was so beautiful, and they were attracted to the beauty of it. So that's nice. I think for most of us, it's because of suffering.

And we see that, we intuit, we see, we understand, we trust, that somehow what Buddhism has to offer, or at least the practice of Buddhism has to offer, is a way out of that suffering, or a way to address it, a way to be honest about it, a new way to understand it. And so then people begin the practice. But then as we turn towards it, and we're kind of constantly in this practice turning towards it, one sooner or later, as the practice grows for us and deepens, we go through a variety of different understandings, transformations, seeings. We're not asked to look at suffering and just suffer without stop. But rather we're asked to look at it, to understand it, to look at it and find a new way to be with it, and to see it in a new way.

And so what I'll propose here today is the five different ways practitioners will encounter or relate to suffering. And in my mind, this is a progressive path of suffering, a deepening, that somehow we go progressively and deepen these five different ways in which we meet suffering and understand it and relate to it. Not that you have to do that today, to do all five, but I do want to start giving you the clear kind of feeling for, sense that this practice is onward leading. This practice has a kind of path model that it works under that's not imposing some foreign map to you. But rather, it's the map of how you will unfold when the conditions are right. And it's remarkable how much there can be this deepening process.

And one part of that deepening process can be understood as a deepening process in relationship to suffering. And then one of the reasons that's very valuable for this *Upanisa* approach is that suffering itself is the supportive condition for the arising of faith, for kind of inspiration, confidence, trust that can give life a lot of meaning, a lot of purpose, orientation, and encouragement. To really realize you're not stuck in suffering, but to have a very significant faith,

and a sense of deep meaning in this path that leads away from it, that frees us from it. And so the more we understand suffering, the more we understand all kinds of things, including more that we have this wonderful faith that can arise, which really helps at the beginning of practice to propel us with enthusiasm along the path.

So, five different levels of our encounter with suffering. And maybe all of you will recognize at some point or other you've had these levels, maybe to various degrees. Or maybe you've had some of them, and they don't have to be progressive, but there also is a logic to them following this progress. And the first level is just suffering, nothing else. Suffering where there's no real understanding of it or awareness of it. It's kind of like we are suffering.

We are despair. We are fear. We are angry, we are discouraged, we are anguished, you name it, we are it. Some difficulty, we're overwhelmed. And it's a huge burden that we don't really see any way out of it, because sometimes it's the mass of all the different collection, a collection of all the different ways that we are reactive, we've been challenged, we've been troubled, all the different ways in which it feels so difficult, this life, or so stressful. And it might be, in some sense, sometimes there's some total of it. Life can be very, very difficult.

And some other times the challenges are many that people have to live with. And somehow, when we kind of become the suffering, we become like a magnet, or all the different sufferings kind of gather together and at times can just make it seem overwhelming. So the first level is just to suffer with no idea. Sometimes people don't even know that they're suffering. Or sometimes the ways in which people are escaping suffering are also such that they don't even know they're suffering.

Because the drive, the resistance or the push away, is so strong that people go into escape mode. People go into distractive mode so quickly because there's something inside that doesn't need to sense very deeply. They don't want to even get close to that pain. They don't want to get close to it. There's a kind of recoiling. It's like you're getting close to the hot stove and you're just pulling back.

And some people don't quite know why they're living this way. Maybe it's a habit. And occasionally there are cracks in the strategy we have of avoiding suffering, and it can be quite difficult. So that's kind of the human condition for many people. The path begins when we do something radical, that is, we recognize our suffering. A clear knowing: this is suffering. This is tension. This is stress.

And in that recognition, we have some degree of freedom. In that my clear mindfulness and clear knowing, oh, this is what it's about, I'm suffering. I've had the occasion myself,

you know, sometimes to not know why I was feeling so bad and rotten. Maybe my word for *dukkha*, my translation, was rotten. And I've always felt rotten, and I didn't know what was going on. But I knew things were kind of off.

And then at some point something shifted. And then, oh, this is what the Buddha was talking about. This is suffering. And then I found myself not kind of lost in it, not identified with it, not defining myself by it. But I said, oh, this is what it is. And so it's kind of like I took one or two steps away, turned around and looked at it and said, oh, this is suffering. Or that I had maybe a little bit more of a bird's-eye view.

When I was in teacher training with Jack Kornfield, I would sit in on his practice discussions. And one of the things he sometimes did with people was, if they had some kind of challenge, some kind of emotional challenge, suffering challenge that was really hard for them to be with, he would do an imagination exercise for them. He'd say, how far away do you have to stand from this difficulty in yourself so you can see it calmly? Would you have to be on the other side of the room? And people would say, no, no, it's too close. Would you have to be across the road? No, no, it's too close.

You know, over that hill, far in the distance, oh, that's okay, I can do it. From there, I can watch it. And then from imagining that distance from their own kind of inner personal challenge, only then did they feel safe enough or comfortable enough to turn towards it and look at it. But that's a radical thing, to pull away and see, oh, this is how it is. This is the suffering. And this is a core aspect of mindfulness, the recognition of it, the knowing this is what's going on.

And it's that recognition, to some degree, even if it's intuitive, even if it's just small at first, that opens a door for being on the path of practice, that gives us the inspiration, oh, there is a way. There is something I can do. There is someone who has the teachings, has the practices that address this. And I've known people who, the first Dharma talk they heard was someone teaching about the *Four Noble Truths* and suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering. And they were so happy because their whole life, their family growing up, their religion growing up, was all in some way denying suffering.

They were kind of pretending it wasn't there and kind of had this smiley face and kind of covered over with pastoral imagery or something. And then you're supposed to always smile and pretend it's not there. And here was someone who was actually addressing it directly, and they were so surprised and inspired. Finally, someone's telling the truth. This is how it is.

One of my favorite little stories about this, maybe I've told this too much, but maybe you'll let me. Here in Palo Alto, I think it was in maybe Menlo Park, there was back in 1964, maybe, kind of the beginning of the psychedelic era. And then Menlo Park was one of the epicenters for psychedelics. I don't know if you knew that, but one of the epicenters for it. And so these three teenage women were kind of hearing about psychedelics and drugs. And then they heard that there was a Zen master in San Francisco who could teach you how to get high without drugs, without LSD.

So they got interested, so they took a trip up to San Francisco to visit Suzuki Roshi in Japantown, where he had his temple. And they came and told him what they were there for, you know, get high without drugs. And he was just so happy to see them. And then he, in a completely happy and delighted way, told them about suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering. And it was not what they came to hear. But he was so happy.

And one of those women went on to become a Buddhist. She's been a Buddhist ever since, a practitioner and practitioner. So this idea of being able to address suffering in a new way, enthusiastic way maybe, maybe even with a certain kind of happiness. Not because suffering is a happy thing. It's happy to know there's a way. So first there has to be a clear recognition, well, this is suffering. That's the second level.

The third level is to be quiet enough, still enough, stable enough, not an easy thing to do, comfortable enough, safe enough to be able to kind of begin seeing, understanding the suffering more closely, see what it's made up of, how it is. And to be able to see that, yes, there's a lot of difficulty, there's a lot of emotional pain, physical pain, worldly pain. And then there's the second arrow that we shoot. It's our contribution to the difficulties. And so this third level is to begin to see that there's our contribution. We're adding something, adding something that's not necessary.

And so first we recognize it, and then as we hang out with it and get to know it better, we see that, yes, I'm resisting it. Yes, I'm judging it. I'm criticizing myself. I'm considering myself somehow a bad person or that I'm at fault. I'm to be blamed. And we get angry, we get afraid, we get afraid of fear. We get angry with anger.

And I have a friend who had a lot of knee pain during Zen practice. And so, you know, the reasonable thing to do with knee pain is to hurt it back. So he would kind of jerk down into his knee and like, you know, terrible knee. You shouldn't be doing this, until he needed knee surgery. So this idea of second arrows can be quite intense, what people do to themselves because of it. But sooner or later, at some point in this practice, the idea is that we're not necessarily responsible for the suffering, but we are responsible for what we add to it. And

that is what Buddhism is really meant to address.

And the Pāli word for suffering, *dukkha*, most literally means pain. Suffering is such a big word, such a big word that I have a kind of a 12-year-old vocabulary in Norwegian. When I was about 27, I ran into a Norwegian and said, how do you say suffering in Norwegian? Because, you know, I knew how to say it hurt. But suffering is kind of an adult word. And so, but in Pāli, it literally means pain.

And then you have to understand in context, even if you study the ancient texts, in context of what the Buddha means when he's using the word pain. And when he's talking about the first noble truth, it's closer to that pain that we contribute to. The pain that comes from that we cling, we crave, we resist, we tighten up, we put pressure, we contract. We contribute stress. It's that contribution.

Of course, Buddha is not going to eliminate ordinary pain. Of course, emotional pain is part of life. But it's the second arrows that are really where Buddhist practice can make the biggest difference. And it makes a huge difference. Most people are overwhelmed by being overwhelmed, not overwhelmed by what's happening in the world. It has to do with our relationship to it, how we take it in, how we process it, how we react to it.

So as practice deepens, we begin to look at that and see more clearly what's going on. Until then, perhaps, the weight of suffering is so heavy, but we don't know what's causing the weight. It just feels oppressive. As we begin seeing our contributions to it, then we can let up. Then we can maybe see the gaps between the challenge we're with and what we're contributing. It might not be possible as easily to let go of our contribution, but it might be possible to start holding it lightly. It might be possible, by seeing what we're doing, to not have the unconscious or implicit belief that it's true, that it has to be that way.

We can start putting a question mark behind the reactivity we have. And this is very helpful for mindfulness practice so that the mindfulness practice can start being simple. Simple knowing. Simple sensing. And this is why the relaxing helps, because partly what is relaxing is the reactivity, the tension we have. And the simple knowing is possible when we're not identified strongly with either the suffering or identified with the reactivity, identified with the second arrows.

And I know for myself, I did a lot of mental noting, because that's what was popular in the 1980s. And I found it very useful for myself. And one of the reasons it was useful was that I started to pay attention to the tone of my voice when I did mental noting. And it told me a lot about how I was practicing. I was not such an innocent practitioner.

So, you know, sometimes my tone, if there was pain, was a little bit exaggerating. I don't know how to replicate it for you, but if you just be willing to take a deep breath and be patient with me, it was kind of like my voice was saying, "Pain, pain, you know, pain," or... that's how I was noting it. And it took me a while to realize that. Or if there was some pleasure or I felt really good or something, the mental notes were more like, "Oh, pleasure, oh, pleasure. Oh." It's okay to do that. But that is, you know, I was engaged in it. I was kind of luxuriating in it. I was attached to it.

And so I learned that I didn't have to do those things. I learned it was actually better to have a relaxed mind, relaxed noting, and just know pain, pleasure. It actually felt better for me and richer for me and was freeing for me to have that very simple relationship, simple noting, simple knowing. So I started to learn to pay attention to how I knew. And I was quite surprised that knowing could be so complicated, that knowing could come along with so many second arrows.

And sometimes knowing can come with resistance. Or sometimes knowing is lethargic, half-hearted. Not again. And, you know, wait a minute. How many breaths do I have to follow? I mean, give me a break. It's just one more breath. I'll kind of be with it because I was told I have to be with it or something, I think I'm supposed to be with it, but, you know, I'll try, I'll kind of be with it. And within a quarter of the breath, I'm off daydreaming because I'm not really into it.

So there's an attitude that can come along with how we know. And those attitudes, I put in the category of these second arrows, what we contribute to make it more difficult for us. So this third level is seeing that. One of the values of that kind of distinction is that at some point, that comes to the fourth level, we can start feeling, sensing the very texture of the suffering we have, the very texture of the tension, the stress, the contractions that we have. We can feel it, the sensory quality of it. We get the sensations of suffering.

And this now is getting very simple. Remember, this is a path to growing simplicity. And so this is where, because we're kind of teasing apart the experience from the things we contribute to it, we also begin seeing how we contribute meaning to the suffering, or attitudes, beliefs, stories to it. And there can be a lot of stories. Hopefully all of you understand about the five hindrances. And so towards anything at all, the hindrances can be operating. They can be sometimes what we contribute.

One of the characteristics of these five hindrances is the mind is involved in a story. The mind is involved in some kind of more complicated idea. And it's the story-making mind that tends to make the hindrances more powerful than they need to be. And so as we settle down and

start seeing this difference between the experience and our reactivity to it, our second arrow to it, at some point we can just feel the second arrow. We're no longer seeing it with the story, no longer seeing it with the prediction of what this means into the future. This is always going to be this way, or the prediction, I can't do this, this is too much for me.

And there are all kinds of ways. But then at some point we're quiet enough, comfortable enough, courageous enough, safe enough to be able to just be there to feel the direct experience here and now of what the suffering feels like. And it'll feel like temperature, hot. It'll feel like tightness, contraction, narrowness in the heart, in the belly, in the mind. There'll be texture to it, and maybe even flavor to it, maybe even a tone of voice to it. So right here and now we're feeling it.

And as we can do that better and better, our mindfulness holds it and the texture, holds the immediacy of it. Then we come to the fifth level of this deepening connection to suffering. And that is, we can hold the suffering, we can be present for the suffering without suffering. That which doesn't have to suffer is what knows the suffering. There's suffering known with ease, with peace. Suffering is known with freedom.

There's a freedom. Oh, this is suffering. We're not identified with it. We're not defined by it. We're not pushed around by it. We're not attacking it. We're not doing anything with it. And there's a feeling, look at this. There's freedom. There's space, lots of space for it. There's ease to hold suffering with what is not suffering.

And to have a kind of visceral sense of a presence, of an attention, of an awareness, which is not suffering at all, in which suffering can rest. And the metaphor I kind of like for this, that I do sometimes in practice discussion with people, maybe I've done it for some of you, is, you know, I'll have people make a really hard fist. And sometimes I do this for people who don't really have access to how to really be present for their own great difficulties, or how to be present in a simple way. So I'll have them do a really tight fist, and then I'll put out my hand and say, rest your fist in my hand. And then I'm kind of hoping that the exercise will work. But so far it seems to have always worked.

As soon as they put their hand, rest their tight fist in my hand, there seems to be a very strong kind of movement to relax the fist, to open it up. And sometimes I encourage them to do it. Yeah, it's okay, you can do that. And it opens up. And so this ability to hold suffering, hold what's difficult, difficult emotions, difficult reactivity, hold it kindly. Hold it generously, to hold it, I say, in the soft palm of mindfulness.

And sometimes I, for myself, have used that image that mindfulness is the two hands cupping

together underneath whatever is difficult and holding it. So it's kind of like holding a bird that's been in shock. So you hold it there until it feels good enough and it's easy for it to fly away, because you're not holding onto it, you're just holding it up, say, in safety. Yeah. And that kind of space to just hold, hold suffering with what doesn't suffer in that kind of way allows for unusual things to happen.

One of those is that, I like to say, your problems won't be solved, they'll dissolve. And what I like to say by that is sometimes we're quite addicted to trying to solve our problems, fix them, understand them. But there's a whole other approach that sometimes is possible in this practice, that you don't have to solve anything. But the tension, the contraction, the *dukkha* that's related to it, that can dissolve. And what happens to a difficult problem when there's no suffering in relationship to it? The problem might still be there, but then you have to deal with it.

I once dropped my plate of food in the dining room here during a retreat. Is that a recipe for suffering? I'm supposed to be the mindful, Mr. Mindfulness. And now everybody sees me drop the plate of food on the floor. But, you know, I didn't see any need to suffer because of that. I just had a plate on the floor and food, and I'll take care of it. But before I could take care of it, people came and helped.

It didn't make anything about it. Just allowed it to be. Was it a problem? Kind of. It was an event. It was an event that required some things. You could call it a problem if you like, but was it a problem? It was just an event that had to be addressed. There was no suffering relationship to it.

So this fifth level is really important for the deepening and deepening of the practice because this is where we really more and more get out of the way. It's more and more not us doing it. It's not about us making anything happen. It's about us just almost getting out of the way, getting out of our own way, and allowing whatever is there to be held in that freedom, to be held in that non-reactivity, to be held in the peace where there's no suffering. And some of the deepest places of holding we have, the deepest attachments to self, the deepest attachment to life itself, the deepest attachment to safety, to existence, they release themselves.

It's not us releasing them. They free themselves, they dissolve themselves, they melt by themselves, melting away. And they can't do it if we're involved, trying to make it happen. And so this fifth level, to hold our suffering with what is not suffering, to hold our suffering with what is not reactivity, to hold the suffering with what we can't exactly claim as me, myself, and mine, to hold it that simple way. And so there's a journey from suffering, and that's all there is, to begin slowly understanding it, teasing it apart, shifting and changing how we

relate to it.

First, maybe the big turn, the biggest turning point, biggest revolution, is this really seeing clearly this is suffering, and no longer being glued to it. Rather than saying, I am suffering, the more accurate way of saying it would be, there is suffering here. I'm here with suffering. Suffering is only a piece of the puzzle. It's not the whole thing. And that's a huge step. For many people, suffering is all-encompassing.

And then to be able to see our contribution, and then to get really intimate with it as a direct present-moment experience. It almost doesn't even matter why it's there anymore. It doesn't matter the history of it. What matters is that you feel it as almost just sensory experience of suffering, and then have the stability, the quiet, the stillness, the spaciousness, to be able to hold it freely, kindly, openly, in the palm of mindfulness.

So, as I've tried to say, I'm trying to depict that there's an onward movement here, onward movement, path or journey that we're on. And I'm hoping that if you can get some feeling for this, because you've understood so well what I said, you're not going to add second arrows to this. You're not going to strive for the path enough and get serious and, you know, suffer more because of what I told you. That's my hope. But my hope is that rather than that, it's going to inspire in you the fact that there is an open door. There is a path right in front of you that's calling you, that's inviting you.

In the same way that a raindrop that falls on the hillside is invited to start rolling down the hill. The raindrop believes in gravity. The raindrop knows, feels the directionality. It has no doubt. For you to feel the pull of gravity, the Dharma gravity, to feel, to know, oh, here, yes, you might not feel it or see it, but you can orient yourself, oh, yes, we're not inherently stuck. We are setting the conditions in place for an unfolding, for movement. And that evokes faith, that evokes inspiration, that evokes courage, that evokes a willingness.

Yes. And one of my favorite words, as some of you know, is the word yes. That knowing all this, yes, I can be with this. Yes, it's worth showing up for this. Yes. It's not just this of the moment. It's this and how it's going to unfold, the influence it's going to provide, the conditions it's going to provide, the unfolding, the flow down that hillside.

So that maybe, just maybe, these little drops of mindfulness will find each other and join together into bigger drops, more enduring drops, until they become little streamlets. And you find yourself feeling more continuous in the moment. You'll feel you're here more than just for a moment. Lo and behold, you were there the whole length of the exhale. Who would have guessed? That's a little streamlet. The whole exhale, the whole inhale, the whole step

of one step. Wow, that was an accomplishment.

It is. The whole next step. And then someday, it might be a few breaths, it might be a few steps, that feel like it's just the most natural thing in the world to have the flow of awareness, the flow of experience in awareness, the flow of awareness in experience. And to have faith, to have inspiration, to have the sense that there is this wonderful unfolding that's inherent to your own constitution, to how you're built and made as a human being. And if you are present and simple enough in your practice, this is the direction it goes.

So to describe this unfolding with suffering, and then tomorrow the talk will be about faith and five levels of faith, with the hope that this repetition of ideas of deepening and flowing speaks to something not only to your conscious mind, but speaks to something deep, deep within you that gives you a lot of confidence, a lot of sense of trust in the practice you're doing here. Thank you all.