

Wednesday Dharma talk: viraga

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One way of understanding this *Upanisa Sutta*, the way that the influence or the support or the necessity of certain conditions to be present so others may arise, can maybe be appreciated by pairing them up a little bit. So it's possible to have suffering without faith. But to have suffering and faith, to have seen suffering, understood it well enough to see that there must be a possibility to the end of suffering, to have faith in that, to have inspiration and motivation, sense of purpose. So it's not just unremitting suffering, but there's this good news that there's a path, there's a practice. And we don't just know it, but we have faith in it. We have trust in it, confidence in it, inspiration in it.

And then there's appreciation and joy. The appreciation, the gladness of appreciation, it comes from an understanding. It's evaluative. It engages the thinking mind a little bit. But that's a wonderful doorway for the awakening of an embodied joy, the lived feeling of joy and a sense of real pleasant aliveness that kind of lives in us rather than comes from evaluation. And that's so good because evaluating or using our thinking mind to get happier, it's a lot of work.

And it can be fine when it's kind of automatic and just simple, but to spend a whole retreat evaluating how good it is to have a path of practice would get old pretty quickly. And then tranquility and happiness. What a wonderful combination. That there's a certain kind of happiness that comes when things have gotten tranquil, peaceful. For many people, maybe they would associate that with safety. For many people, they don't have that. And to really have some deep sense of inner safety even, that there's a different kind of happiness, well-being, that can well up.

And *samādhi*, seeing becoming, knowledge and vision of becoming, to have the real stability and stillness, the tripod of the *samādhi* that allows us to be still, stable, and bring things

into focus very clearly with a mind that's not going to react. And we can see much more clearly below, through, through the concepts, the ideas that we create, that we cover over, the stories, that keep us separated from the lived experience of the moment. And to see that lived experience directly, immediately, is to see the streams of becoming, things that appear in the senses, appear in the mind, and go, comings and goings.

And then the pairing of these next two, of disenchantment and what is usually translated as dispassion. And these are kind of like two sides of the same hand maybe, that the disenchantment is an understanding, an attitude towards something, an object. So it could be clinging. It could be the idea that getting more money is going to make you happy. The idea that having more friends on social media, that's the way to, it's a wonderful feeling of like you belong, you're important, you have a place in this world. And so there's a lot of drive to figure out how to have more friends and more likes.

I've heard that, I've read about that. Some people just live for that. Live and die around that. So it's the object of concern that I think we want so desperately maybe. So we get disenchanted in it. The dispassion is the fading of that drive, fading of that desire, fading of the pushing and the compulsivity, the drivenness of the desires we have.

And it helps to no longer believe in that winning the California lottery is, that will make everything good for you. You know, you name it. There's all these things we put our, we invest in as if this is, this will do it for us. Having the right relationship. Having a relationship. A good meditation. And so then at some point we start, there's this process called dispassion.

The Pāli word is *virāga*. And the *rāga* is a very powerful Indian word, but it has two meanings. The powerful one is usually translated into English either as passion or lust. It's a powerful, compulsive desire of some type that the English words maybe don't quite capture the full intensity of it. And the other meaning of *rāga*, it means the dye that we use to color clothes. And so *vi* means apart from, so apart from, fading away of the dye.

So you dye some clothes and put it in the sun and wear it a long time. And slowly the color fades away from the clothes. And so that meaning of *virāga*, and then sometimes *virāga* means the fading of this compulsivity or even the completely separated from it. There's no more compulsivity, no more this kind of compulsive passion or lust at all. But it also, it implies in this stage, the compulsivity, drivenness, the strong kind of unrelentness of certain desires that we live in, I've lived with maybe for years, begins to fade. There's a fading, like fading of the dye, the color. It starts to fade away.

And this is important to appreciate because sometimes people on the Buddhist path have

this idea, they have this magic, it's kind of a magical idea that there's something sudden, sudden experience of awakening, sudden experience, something, something's going to happen, I'm going to touch something, I'm going to see something, and I'll be happy ever after. Or this particular pain, my leg will go away, or this, you know, this will make this go away. And then we'll have to. And I've sat in meditation watching for that to happen. Just thinking, oh, you know, I'm supposed to go there. No, it's supposed to go away. And just, it was going to happen.

And I've wasted my youth doing that too. And I kind of, that faded away. I never exactly got disenchanted with that, but maybe I did. But what happened was that some of the things I wanted to go away, that was like a cat at the mouse door kind of watching it, they would repeatedly go away, but not when I was watching. Like I'd go to lunch and I'd come back from lunch and, where is it? Where did it go? You know, I didn't see it. And so after a while I thought, okay, enough of that. I guess it doesn't work, maybe, to keep looking and looking. So I guess it's kind of a disenchantment.

And so it encouraged me to trust this practice more deeply. It works, but I don't have to see it work. Things are also working kind of when I'm not paying attention. And then some things fade away slowly over time. I've had fears that I came to practice with that had a strong sense of guilt and fear of rejection and all kinds of things that, and I never saw them even fading. But that's what they did. They slowly over time became less and less and less and less, and then they disappeared.

There wasn't this magic moment. And so to appreciate that some of this deep work of this practice and some of the deep freeing up and releasing of this practice is a gradual process that sometimes can take years, slowly, slowly fading away, drop by drop. And sometimes things are kind of quick. Remember I had, it depends, you know, on this quick and slow, what is it? Remember I had this, I've been practicing for some years, and I knew that I had to really feel like I was up against this edge of practice where I really could feel like I don't believe in this game of self that I was playing, this defining myself a certain way, presenting myself a certain way, and, you know, this whole kind of social construct of self that I had been living in.

So I always felt like, boy, it's time to let go of this. But I couldn't because I was afraid. I felt like I was sitting on the abyss and the edge of the abyss, and letting go of it was like stepping into the abyss. It's just like. So when I went to practice my long period of practice in Asia, I knew about this, but I decided to have a ritual. And the ritual was that when I crossed the international date line flying across the Pacific, that that would be when I would commit my-

self or dedicate myself to letting go of this. That would be the marker. That would be the help I needed, the ritual.

So the airline pilot made the announcement, we're crossing the date line, and so I did a little bow and hoped for the best. And then I didn't see it go, but a year and a half later I was flying back. And I remembered, you know, what I did flying there. And I looked, and I couldn't see it. The thing that troubled me so much and that I was trying to let go of, again, it disappeared when I wasn't watching, you know. And maybe a year and a half is pretty fast for this kind of thing. Maybe it's slow, but certainly it was, I can't tell you if it was gradual or sudden or anything.

I just knew that I was engaged in this practice pretty intensively, and somehow it just faded from concern, interest, focus, and slowly, somehow through this practice, it got resolved, it got dissolved. And I don't have anything better, any better story to tell you. So there's all kinds of ways that these things work. And this fading away, I think, is very mature, I think very reasonable, very helpful. So there's a kind of a humility around that, that you're not trying to destroy your challenges or have the conceit of making a sudden change, but learning to live with yourself with these things and accept oneself and practice with it and not be embarrassed and understand you have foibles. And this is what I'm working with.

And slowly, there's a slow process. And in my case, it was clear that there was a continuity of practicing. Just keeping at it, staying in the stream of practice, staying there, something faded. And this word *virāga*, to translate it as dispassion, is the most common translation. Maybe it'll take a thousand years in English-speaking countries for that word, dispassion, to change its association so we get inspired when we hear it. Because the word *virāga* in India, the way that it's, my understanding is the kind of, it's an inspiring word for people in Indian religions, kind of in the same way that maybe freedom is a little bit more inspiring for some people in the United States, kind of like a, that's freedom is like a be-all and end-all or something important.

And so sometimes I've translated or rendered *virāga* as freedom in order to kind of get some of the meaning, the freedom from compulsivity, but also get some of the more inspiring sense of what it can be about, freedom. And I think that this process of fading works really well when we really know how to connect and feel and be present for the sensations, the feeling in our body and our mind of compulsivity, of drivenness, of desire, of this kind of driven passion, of lust, grasping. So it isn't just, you know, certainly there's disenchantment with those movements of the mind. There's also dispassion towards the objects that we're grasping at, and both of those together.

But for this dispassion to work, this fading away, the closer, more intimate you can feel what's going on. So it's no longer evaluative, no longer like, oh, winning the California lottery, that'll do it for me. That'll be the thing. But rather, it's, oh, it's the actual wanting itself, the craving itself, the tightness, the contraction, the sting of it, the tension of it, the headache of it, the pain of it, that that's what we see. We notice it. So the first level of these five levels is that, again, is noticing. Noticing, noticing, noticing.

Sometimes I've translated *sati* as noticing because I kind of sometimes feel like mindfulness is used too much in English now. And people kind of, it just kind of becomes just a generally big, good thing. And so, but to offer something, sometimes kind of novel, to call it noticing, what's your religious practice? Noticing. Then they feel sorry for you. But, you know, noticing is specific. You notice, there's a clarity, there's a recognition in noticing.

So this noticing of the thing that's going to fade away, and we know it's going to fade away because we can feel that it involves tightening, tension, pressure, stress. It's like you're holding onto something with your hand for dear life, and after a while you realize that holding the part of the bell, holding it for dear life really hard, you know, because it's so important to have a really good thing to hit the bell with. And after a while, you could say, well, you know, it's not that important. I don't have to be so attached to this. But also I could feel how much it hurts to grasp it so hard. So the fading away has to do with recognizing, noticing clearly the pain, the suffering, the *dukkha* that's there in the compulsivity, in the drivenness.

So rather than seeing it as bad news to see that you're holding on to something, it's actually good news to be able to feel it, to really feel intimately, this is tight. And that was one of the levels of suffering at the very beginning, was to feel it intimately, the tension, the direct experience of it. So here specifically feeling the thing that's going to release, the grasping, the holding, the compulsivity, to really notice and feel it. And then in feeling it, to begin learning how to hold it lightly, learning how to be soft around it, learning how to hold it in the palm of the hand rather than the fist of the hand, learning to lighten up around it, learning to be gentle, tender, learning how to be clear and open, maybe giving the very thing that hurts because it's suffering, that's giving it breathing room.

I like this word, breathing room. I like a lot to breathe with my experience. So in this case, breathe with the suffering, breathe with the tightness, the contraction. Just breathe with it, breathe with it. A contracted belly, just breathe with it, breathe through it, forever, as if. So first notice and then loosening up around it, lightening up around it.

And then in that kind of breathing-room space of noticing, then there's room for things to begin to fade away. So there's a fading-away process. Things begin to soften, open up, re-

lease, slow down. And we're there to just support that with the warmth of our noticing, the warmth of our mindfulness. And so appreciate that just being with it is enough. And then at some point, things open up enough, release enough, that the release of certain attachments we have creates a clearing, a clearing in the field of awareness, a clearing in the mind.

And what was occupied before by clinging is not occupied by that anymore. And so the interesting kind of expression, where is the absence of clinging? Where is the absence of that particular clinging to the California lottery? Where's that? And it's nowhere in a sense, but maybe there's a feeling of space in the mind, openness in the mind. There's an absence there. So this fading away leads to something that feels like there's breathing room, there's space, there's a wonderful clarity, like when the fog clears and the air is clear, you can see across the bay.

And so do I appreciate that? Oh, there's fading. It's fading away, it's fading away, now it's clear. And because you see the disappearance or the fading away of certain particular things, particular clings we have, and to see the goodness of what there, the goodness of the clarity of the breathing room, supports the other fading away. It gives us courage or confidence that, oh yeah, things can fade away. It's a good process. Fading away of attachments leads to a really good space.

And over, people who've practiced Buddhist practice for many years, it's kind of slowly a process of kind of housecleaning. You're slowly cleaning up your house, of all the attachments, cleaning up and clearing out and making it clearer and clearer. And some of us have accumulated a lot of stuff in that house. Some of us are hoarders. You know, hardly room to move around in there. But slowly we empty it out, slowly we clear it out, to appreciate that clearing.

And then the fifth level of dispassion, *virāgaṃ*, is freedom. Because it's understood in the Pāli tradition, the Buddhist tradition, that *virāga* sometimes means liberation itself, awakening itself. Because with liberation there is no *rāga* anymore. There's no compulsivity. There's none of this compulsive desire, lust, craving. And then appreciate that. That's the topic for tomorrow, kind of.

So one of the ways I appreciate *virāga*, this process of fading, is that it calls on us to have a lot of patience. It kind of calls, it helps to have the long-term view that it takes a while for all this to work. It's not to snap your fingers. You might have heard the story about the Dalai Lama, but I was very touched by it. He was speaking, giving a talk, in a very big auditorium, I think it was maybe a multi-day teaching he was doing, big auditorium in Arizona.

And talking about, I don't know what he was talking about, but someone, you know, well into the teaching sessions, stood up and asked the Dalai Lama, what's the quickest way to get enlightened? And apparently the Dalai Lama stood there for a long time, didn't say anything, but he had tears running down his cheek. I think he felt very sad that anybody be oriented that way, to the quickest way to enlightenment, that that just somehow troubled him deeply. That's kind of maybe the conceit of it or maybe the, you know, wanting to get it quickly so you can go on to better things.

There was a spoof of meditators once that I saw, the video, where some person said, talked about his meditation. Everyone else on the retreat was, you know, huffing and puffing and practicing seriously. But he was outside on his phone talking to someone and said, I nailed it in 10 minutes. In the video, he says that with a tremendous sense of entitlement and pride and conceit. Look at me, I nailed it in 10 minutes. So I was touched by the Dalai Lama crying over someone who had that kind of attitude.

So this idea of fading away takes time. This whole process takes time. And maybe it needs time. Maybe it goes faster if you're patient and give it a long time. Probably if you nail it, if you're the kind of person who nails it in 10 minutes, it probably takes 10 times longer than most people. The level of challenge that the person's up against, that's going to really take a long time with that attitude.

So to kind of be very patient and in it for the long term, and I appreciate that. Have faith, confidence, conviction, inspiration. Maybe it doesn't matter how long it takes, but what matters is to be on the path. What matters is to do the practice. And my hope for everybody is that who learns this practice enters into each moment of practice in such a way that you'll never regret that you had that moment of practice. That each moment of being mindful, of being present, it feels good, it feels right. This is good.

And if endeavor leads to anything else, I'm glad I had this time. This is how you live it up for your youth or your elderhood. Doesn't matter how old you are, but this was good. To be alive in this way at this moment. I have no regrets, this is good. And if you do that, there's also this long-term process that unfolds over time. It's not static. Things are always changing.

But as Diana said at the beginning of the retreat, how they change has a lot to do with how the rudder is pointed. And so this *Upanisa Sutta* is kind of saying where the rudder is pointing, or where the compass is pointing towards. So you have some sense of this, and everything changes, but you can change it in a particular way. That's really good. You can put the boat into the current of the river rather than into the eddy, and the current can carry you.

So in this *Upanisa Sutta*, it ends with that metaphor of the rain coming down to the mountain and making riverlets, streamlets, and creeks, and coming out to be the big river, the big going across the plains and eventually into the ocean. And each of these earlier steps of *Upanisa*, they all involve, there's already movements of fading away all along. And for each of you, I'm sure there are certain things that have faded away for you. And it's valuable to have a little bit of appreciation to that. You don't have to spend a lot of time with it. Just appreciate that you're calmer, less caught in certain ways, less tense in certain ways.

As a way of encouraging this process of feeling, yes, this is good. Yes, the rudder is pointing in the right direction. Yes, it takes a while. But I've been here a while now, and it's working a bit. And with that appreciation, that faith, to allow yourself to dip in over and over again, just keep dipping back in. Dip back into the practice, into the sitting, into the walking, into just being here.

Dip in as much as you can, sitting and eating your meal. It can be dipping in right there, just being with your eating. When you go to your room and you're alone there, dip back in. Make the room your temple. Stay close to this practice, this way of being. If you're walking around the property, enjoying the trees and the birds, do it from the point of dipping in, staying in the flow, staying in that process, staying close, staying directly with your experience.

Your thinking mind, your daydreaming mind, your preoccupied mind, your troubled mind, is almost certainly quieter than it was when you came. Protect that, stay close to that. Be careful how you go around so you don't come back from walking around with the thinking mind kind of reactivated. Try to stay in, stay immersed, stay connected. Stay close to where the current is, the current of practice, the current of the Dharma, the current of this endless stream, river of time.

And we get to sit right in the middle of the river to experience that, the current, the currents of becoming, which is only found when you've dipped into here, the present. And maybe that gentle current, river of becoming, help dissolve all that troubles you. Help dissolve, fade away, wherever you're caught, wherever you're holding on to, whatever is compulsive in you or driven in you that weighs you down. May what can dissolve, dissolve in this river of time. Thank you.