

Thursday dharma talk: vimutti

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It's a long distance from the top of the Himalayas to the ocean, but some of those raindrops make the whole trip. And at some point, coming across the great plains of India, there are no obstacles to the flow. And it goes, this mighty, strong current flow carries everything that's floating in it onward into the ocean. No obstacles, that kind of freedom just to flow.

The eleventh step in the *Upanisa* sequence is *vimutti*, v-i-m-u-t-t-i, which means something like complete freedom or thorough freedom, in the same way that *vipassanā* means thorough or complete or emphatic seeing. Here we have emphatic freedom. As we do these twelve steps of *Upanisa*, suffering is there pretty much the whole way through. But there's a fading of suffering as we go along. What's also there all the way through is freedom. If you only think that freedom is at the end of the path, then we're focused only on that.

We miss the extraordinary movement of freedom all along the path. For that water to flow from the mountains, the drops have to be free to flow and flow. And that freedom, in a sense, maybe gets larger as it continues to go. And so there's a fading of suffering and a growing of freedom. And I love it that the goal of freedom, of liberation, is not only at the end of the path, it's found all through it, every step along the way. So much so that the very practice we do has within it freedom.

It may be only hints of it at first, but to appreciate that freedom is there all along supports it, helps it to grow. So here with freedom, I have come up with another five levels that all have to do with freedom from, which is the primary way that in Buddhism liberation is talked about, freedom from something. After the five, not really a level anymore maybe, something else entirely. There's freedom to, or freedom for.

So the first level of freedom that kind of maps along with these steps of liberative dependent arising is clear, is choice, the freedom of choice. And there are people who love to argue that

there is no choice. Even if it's true, it's not really relevant at the very beginning. At some point we make a choice to look at our suffering, to see it and recognize it, not be submerged in it, be fully identified with it as the sufferer, not pushed around by it, not a victim of our own suffering. There's a glimmer of freedom that begins right there in seeing it, what this is, suffering, where we're not kind of glued to it anymore.

And that's a remarkable step. And we can just wait around until it accidentally happens again, or we can choose to be mindful, choose to look again, to see. And the people who make that choice tend to grow in the *Dharma* more than those who wait for accidents. Some people might say, well, there's no choice, but we create the conditions for the choice to be natural. No one's choosing. But then we're making a choice to get those conditions in place.

So choice is actually very important. We have to be committed, engaged. There has to be a devotion to this amazing path or an inspiration. And faith has a lot to do with choice. And the freedom to choose is a phenomenal thing, to not all feel like we're just a victim of our impulses. We have to go along with every thought and belief and desire and hatred. But we say, no, we don't have to do this. There's another way.

And faith in the *Dharma*, the *saddhā*, is often in Buddhism understood as a form of desire. So it's a little bit different than just believing in something. It involves a desire to practice, to be free, and a desire to go towards something which is healthy and wholesome. And that's a choice. Some people will make a big choice at some point to go for refuge. Then somehow that movement of faith, maybe publicly, maybe not, but somehow we express, we enunciate, give voice to what's in our hearts.

So it can grow, so we can be behind it, so that more of us gets kind of coordinated around this deep wish, deep understanding, deep faith. So it's a choice too, but like, this is what I want to do. This represents my most important values sometimes. And so there's a choice. And to make that choice is that kind of freedom. It's a free choice, and it can feel really good to make that choice, to discover that we have it.

You know, it's remarkable to know some of these inspiring people who have chosen maybe because of faith, or chosen to stay close to their faith, or so close to what they believe, or close to their freedom. I'm still moved by the story that the Dalai Lama tells of meeting a monk who'd been for some decades imprisoned in Chinese prisons. And then he was released and was able to escape, or came to India. And when the Dalai Lama met him, the Dalai asked him, was he ever in danger in prison? And probably he thought, you know, was there ever torture? Were you ever starved? Were you threatened to kill you or something?

The monk said, yes, I was in danger. Yes. I was in danger of losing my compassion for my prisoners, the people who were keeping him in jail. What a choice. What a phenomenal freedom. And for some people, faith gives them a lot of freedom to not give in, not give up.

And then we go and practice further, and there's a freedom of clarity. We start becoming clear slowly of the stories that we kind of are caught in and see the world through. Some are stories that really happened to us, the past. So they're true in a certain way, but we're caught in them. And they become the lens through which we see ourselves, the world, see others. And we act on old conditioning, old patterns.

And the tradition puts a lot of emphasis on what's called the five hindrances, which I think of as kind of an expression of storytelling mind and strong desires and the fantasies and purposes and meanings and imaginations around desire that keep us caught in them. Strong ill will and hostility, the stories and meanings, the history, that keeps us glued to the hostility. The stories that tell us that it's too much and impossible. I can't do this. I won't do it. This is wrong or something.

When we shut down and freeze and go limp and numb and fall asleep instead of be awake, there's the regrets and remorse we have that we get caught in. I like to think of it as remorse, since it means to chew again in Latin, which we keep that morsel in our mouth and keep chewing and chewing and chewing. It's the same thing for years. Agitation of all kinds, and then doubt. And these days I think of the last hindrance not quite as doubt, but more as uncertainty and indecisiveness about what is wholesome and unwholesome. We can't recognize the wholesome way forward in any moment.

So, when we get into the gladness, appreciation, joy, tranquility, there's a quieting of the storytelling mind. There's a quieting of the hindrances, of these strong forces in us. And there's a clearing out, temporarily at least, and the mind feels clear. The mind's free of those. So we can really be present without the filter of these very strong filters.

And so there's a freedom from the hindrances. And for some people, it takes a few years, maybe even a few decades, to really clear out the hindrances, to find a place where the mind is free of hindrances. So it can do the deeper work of the *Dharma*. So the freedom of clarity, clarity from the hindrances, so we can really see.

And the next freedom is the freedom of purification. There's a whole, one of the biggest, absolute, probably it qualifies as the biggest manual in meditation in our tradition, is called *The Path of Purification*. And I certainly had, maybe because coming out of the '60s and counter-culture and all that, might explain a little bit why I didn't trust words like purity and purifica-

tion. But I've come to, sometimes I try to get around it by using words like clean, cleansed. So it is.

But there is the beautiful experience of being cleansed completely inside and out. The mind, the heart feels clean. How does it get clean? By somehow dislodging things that are unclean. Dislodging things which are somehow soiling things, that make it more difficult or challenging. And in the shorthand, those things are called the unwholesome.

What's unwholesome? And so when we go further into the *Upanisa*, the starting review around tranquility and to the happiness and the *samādhī*, that's where there's a growth of wholesomeness. The unwholesome falls away. There's no more any unwholesome tendencies, unwholesome thoughts, unwholesome desires. The hindrances are really abated, not there. And so there's freedom from the unwholesome.

It's temporary, but it counts for a lot. It counts because we, wow, this is possible. It's possible to be so clean. It's like someone who had never taken a shower in their life. Someone says, you know, you could get clean. I'm fine. I don't know what you're talking about. Leave me alone.

And then accidentally they take a shower and they say, why didn't you tell me about this? I sparkle, I'm shining, I'm tingling all over, and I feel clean. Whoa, that's nice. So it's remarkable what deep states of concentration, unification can provide. And so the *samādhī* is unifying, gathering, because unwholesome is not fragmenting us.

And the unification process is so important. I think more and more I really want to translate *samādhī* as unification, because it's a gathering together of all the different capacities we have, or a lot of them, important ones, so they can operate together in a coordinated way. I said earlier that we need our intelligence. So I mentioned this article, so I wanted to read some of that, a little bit from this article that came across this year. But first I have to deal with the top five best bone builders.

So then the abstract summary says, Researchers at the University of Notre Dame now suggest that intelligence doesn't live in one smart region of the brain at all. Instead it emerges from how efficiently and flexibly the brain's many networks communicate and coordinate with each other. So this coordination that I call unification.

Psychologists have long observed that skills like attention... Are you paying attention? Isn't that kind of what we're doing here? The skill of attention? So what are they... maybe they know something we don't know. Psychologists have long observed that

skills like attention, memory, do you know that *sati* is sometimes called memory? And then when I practiced in Burma, we kind of reused our ability to remember as a way of strengthening our *sati* perception. Isn't that what we're doing here too? Don't we like occasionally perceive something? Occasionally happens. And then language.

We kind of dismiss language a little bit in our scene. Words, language, stories. We say language gets in the way, words. But we should be a little bit more careful. Language is part of the intelligence. And there are other, all these attentional capacities we have, there's more than just these. But these come into play when we're doing mindfulness and they get strengthened and develop.

So, say, psychologists have long observed that skills like attention, memory, perception, and language tend to be linked. People who perform well in one area often perform well in others. This pattern is known as general intelligence. It influences how effectively individuals learn, solve problems, and adapt across academic, professional, social, and health settings. I don't know why they didn't include meditation here. I think that must have been a little typo.

So it's a little bit repeating. According to the researchers, general intelligence is not a specific ability or mental strategy. Instead, it reflects a pattern in which many cognitive skills are positively related. They propose that this pattern stems from how efficiently the brain's networks are structured and how well they work together. Intelligence is a property of the brain as a whole. I like that, it's like the word whole, making everything more coordinated and working together. So that's another way of saying unification.

Here, system-wide coordination. Coordination does not carry out cognition itself, but determines the range of cognitive operations the system can support. Successful coordination requires strong integration and long-distance communication. I think what they mean across the brain, I guess, a long distance, I don't know, it's two inches.

And so in terms of this *Upanisa* discussion about dependent arising, oh, it's not causal, not one thing causes another, but that one thing creates the condition for something else to arise, is partly because we're setting the conditions, we're creating, laying down neural pathways, neural communication, where all kinds of things can begin happening in a natural way. And to do that well, it helps to become free of the way that we sever the connections, the way that the mind operates in a divided way. We specialize certain regions for the brain. Maybe some people specialize in the fear section of the brain, and they're really caught in the stories and ideas and emotions of fear. Some people in the desire section. Some people cut off their

memory section.

There's all kinds of ways of it. Sometimes it atrophies, different parts. Some people specialize on the really good specialization, and what their eyes see is on a screen. And the particular unique patterns are there, structures of the brain that support that kind of activity. But the idea of becoming whole, all of us who are included, my younger son went to a school where they really focused on this. And there are all kinds of ways they tried to develop the whole person.

You know, there was singing and dancing they did regularly. There was memorizing poetry and song and reciting together, singing together. There was drawing and painting and crafts they did, and they were focused on the whole person. I think he didn't like the school, he was glad when he left, but it worked anyway. It was working at a deeper level, and developing as a whole person, it's remarkable what came out of it.

And so when we're developing the ability to be present, when we have to recognize what's happening, to see clearly, we're actually developing cognitive capacities. It's not a small thing to do. The ability to come back, to recognize we're wandering off, recognizing the subtlety, the subtle details of what's happening in our perception, to notice the difference between tightness and contraction, to notice the movements of the belly in great detail, and recognizing where there's pulling and smoothness, and sometimes jerking with the breath. And so you see all these little details. It could seem boring, it could seem uninteresting, but it is developing and strengthening the mind.

And one of the things we are actually doing in *Vipassanā* practice is developing, strengthening capacities that we have in doing this. It takes a lot of repetition, so that these capacities get stronger and can support us in deeper, deeper ways. And this ability to heal the divides of the hindrances, to heal the divides of the unwholesome, to heal the divide of our wounds and our fears and all this, it takes a long time. It takes a lot of care, a lot of compassion, a lot of respect, maybe even reverence for the process.

And so this process of freedom, the freedom to do this, freedom to purify, freedom to care for, freedom to heal, freedom to begin to unify what's there. And the main reason I want to talk about it here is that the unified mind is more likely to be a wholesome mind. It's the fragmented mind that doesn't see the whole, that gets a little bit skewed and ends up focusing more on things which are unwholesome, that kind of see things on the surface, the surface mind, rather than from the deep mind or the inclusive mind that includes both the surface and the depth.

So this is really important to understand, because something's growing all along in practice, and the wholesome begins to grow a lot when we have this whole, this unification process that grows as well. Sometimes the purification process is quite intense. And in the ancient texts there's a word that talks about, you know, someone practicing, and I don't know if they mean it literally or not, but there's a process of vomiting. Something just so seems like it's being purged. It can be quite intense occasionally for some people.

I think there are people who vomit through this practice, because I don't know exactly why it's vomit, but certainly some deep psychological stuff can get purged, and it really feels like a purification process. And it can be difficult, and sometimes it can take a long time. I think in my teacher in Burma, U Paṇḍita, probably his favorite story is to tell, he's told, you know, I don't know, a number of times to us. It was about people who either were in the Burmese army, or were in guerrillas fighting the army, who had been involved in fighting for a long time, and they put down their arms, they retired or something, and they came to the monastery, and they would run into, they'd sit and meditate, and their history would rear itself.

They had so much, we can now call trauma, so much deep pain and memories and challenge about what they did, what they saw. And he would talk about how difficult it was for them. And always it was like they sat through it and saw it to the other side. I don't think he ever gave any more detail than that. That for him was enough to say it that way. It was supposed to encourage us.

And so this purification process, freeing ourselves of the unwholesome. And then the next step, the fourth level of freedom, is opening. I think something really begins to open. And the primary thing I associate with this opening is the whole idea of self begins to lessen. The whole enchantment with self, enchantment with self being under the spell.

Our society is an amazing magician. It does this amazing magic trick. We don't even see how it's done usually. But the magic trick is on us. They're casting a spell on us about who we're supposed to be, how we're supposed to be, what we're supposed to look like, what we're supposed to say, what we're supposed to believe, what it looks like to be a good person, a right person, what it looks like to be a bad person, not a trustworthy person, impure person.

And there's so much complication and difficulty around this whole world of selfing that it's quite painful. And so at some point to understand deeply the disenchantment, to break the spell, break the trance of the unhealthy selfing, the kind of selfing that doesn't support us. Maybe to learn there's a healthy selfing. There's a way of holding a self, being a self, seeing ourselves as a self that is skillful, that cultivates wholesome, supports the practice. But to begin being free of attachment to self, free from being caught in self.

Because we see what doesn't work. We see how it drags us down, see how it limits us. We see that there's another side, there's beyond it, there's freedom from it. There's the opening, leaving it behind. So this opening of freedom from self-preoccupation, self-consciousness is a phenomenal thing. So much suffering we have around self, selfing.

And then this disenchantment, fading away, dispassion. So one of the central features there, I think, has a lot to do with self and clinging, clinging to self. And then you come to the fifth one, fifth level. And now the freedom is getting bigger and bigger. At some point, the freedom becomes recognizable and kind of real. It feels like it's maybe just a millimeter away, or it's sitting under our shoulders, or it's in our hearts, or it accompanies us.

The sense of freedom is no longer just a little freedom of making a choice, but it's grown and developed and becomes kind of a phenomenal companion, maybe in the same way that suffering was the companion before. And now suffering is reduced, and we have this new companion, freedom. And so knowing that becomes more interesting. It's almost like there's a come here, come and see. Here's the stream. Here's the river. Here's where the river runs smooth and easy.

The Buddha talked about how in mountains, the creeks and the streams going over the boulders and the rocks and everything, it can be really noisy. But it comes down to the plains, and it's just this big, mighty river. It flows silently. So at some point, there's this kind of, we're in the silence, freedom, the silence of not noise, not freedom of noise, but freedom from the noise of self, selfing. And as some of you probably know, a lot of selfing involves stories, ideas, beliefs, telling ourselves things.

So there's a silence, the flow, silence of that. And it's very attractive. It feels right. It feels good. It feels wholesome. Yes. And so, to allow ourselves to be in the flow of the practice over and over again, return to it, be in it, practice over and over again, be willing to start again at the beginning, go through all the steps over and over again.

And each time we do it, the river bottom is getting smoother and smoother. We're getting more and more drops that are participating, the flow is becoming bigger. And at some point, it's a wonderful time, you know, because rivers are not really conscious in the way we are. So they don't anticipate the ocean that's up ahead. And that's actually important. No anticipation, just happy to be in the river. So nice, just being in the river over and over again, not anticipating what's happening, no longer leaning forward, partly because the level of freedom, the level of practice is enough.

That's great. Why sully it with desires and craving? And why would the river flowing happily

and freely be preoccupied, scared, or desirous or impatient to get to the ocean? So just being in the flow. And so generally the rivers, I suspect, are quite surprised to finally find themselves in the ocean. Well, this is new.

And it's even more surprising because all that current they're going with, through falling, I mean, this is going to go on forever, so powerful. But what's happening here? The current is dissolving out into the ocean and fades away. And then suddenly that drop sees, wait a minute, I'm surrounded by my good friends, but it's so peaceful. There's no current anymore. It's a deep letting go.

And then occasionally, if the drop's near the surface, it itself dissolves, evaporating up into the sky. So, release, the full release. And what it is, is it, you know, kind of silly to call it evaporating, but it's a full release of clinging. There's no clinging whatsoever, and this release, the last vestiges of clinging, is very encouraging, it's inspiring, it's meaningful, to know that it can be done. But it's been going on all along. The freedom is there the whole path from the beginning.

To recognizing and appreciating it makes each step meaningful and significant in and of itself, and that it matures into a full release. So those are the five levels. And then there's the sixth. And that is, you could say in colloquial speech, the freedom to be yourself. And what I understand that to mean is not, you know, the whole idea of self is not really needed anymore. So it's okay to call it freedom to be yourself.

But that there's freedom for what is most natural in you to be. The natural being, beingness of who you are, that is fully allowed to be. There's all these ways that we are unique, human beings, all these ways that we're special, all these ways in which our natural system works may be different from each other. But to see and recognize how this too is just my version of natural, and to feel free to be our natural self, to let this deep wholesomeness flow upward from the depth of who we are, and by that natural, wholesome, healthy movement.

To be unobstructed, unlimited. Enlightenment, liberation, it doesn't leave us as a blank. It leaves us with the richness, the fullness of this beautiful natural system we have, where we're capable of love and compassion, capable of being nourished by our care for each other, deep feelings of things that motivate us. The conditions within us, the conditions around us in the world, come together into maybe some deep understanding of how to live this life, how to be motivated, what's important for us, what to do, how to contribute, what is right for us, what is our way, and what is your way when you're free.

I don't know what your way will be when you're totally free, but I believe you will be a gift.

You will be a gift to this world. And it's been wonderful to meet with you during this retreat, and I can say you're already gifts. It was a pretty wonderful gift to me just to be able to meet with you this way.

And then the last thing to say about this whole process of freedom, kind of repeating it, is a freedom progressively freeing ourselves from suffering, the fading away, the releasing that starts in small ways and small steps and grows over time. And at the same time, parallel to that, there's a growth in freedom. And at some point we reach a tipping point where the movement of freedom becomes stronger than the movement toward suffering. Thank you.