

Knowledge of Freedom

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If someone ended up being lost deep in the jungle, deep in the wilderness, somehow didn't know how they got there, and somehow they ended up never having been there before, jungle, wilderness, completely confusing, they might wander around for a long time and not even know which way to go. Then maybe, after many hours, many days, many years, they somehow stumble out. But they didn't learn the way out. They stumbled accidentally out. Yeah, if they ended up lost in the same forest again, they still might not know the way out.

But someone else pays attention, learns about the terrain, the trees, the mountains, looks at the details, gets a sense of the sun and east and west and north, gets oriented, and begins understanding. They're still lost, but they really are kind of learning about the signposts, learning about what's here. And they eventually find their way out. Maybe they stumble out as well, but they've been tracking carefully, learning. And so if they ever end up lost in the same place, they know the place. They know a way out now.

So it's one thing to find benefits from this practice, somehow to relax or feel comfortable in a deep way or feel concentrated nicely or settled. But sometimes it's kind of an accident, or it happens because there are conditions around that kind of support it to happen. I certainly, I didn't know how I got concentrated. I didn't realize that some of it was just that I was on retreat and there was nothing else to do, and I could just be left alone, and I settled and relaxed. Just the vacation of it all was so different from my everyday life.

That, oh, this practice is great. This is fantastic. This is the way. But I didn't know how it was the way. I just wasn't paying attention. I just thought, I just happened to be in a relaxing place, and it was good to relax deeply.

It's easy to go through this path and not really pay attention to the details, to understand the signposts. And if you understand the signposts, understand how this process works, not only

can you find the way again, but you can be a guide for others. You can support others to do it as well.

So this **Upanisa Sutta** teaching provides signposts and provides kind of the operating principle for finding our way out of the jungle. And one of the important operating principles has to do with this word, *upanisā*, which is not completely clear where it comes from, but it's sometimes called the proximate condition. That which sits near. And some people say that it's related to the word *Upaniṣad*, which is a sacred literature of ancient Hinduism, which people say means to sit near, to sit near the teacher, to hear the teachings.

And so there's a Pāli version of *Upaniṣad*. *Upaniṣad* is an *upanisā*, *upanisada*. And so, to sit near, you have to be close to something. You have to kind of dwell in the proximity of something which has a good influence. Rather than looking for cause for the spiritual change, the path, we're looking for the conditions that allow something to grow, to unfold, to flow.

And this **Upanisa Sutta** ends with the analogy of the water going down the river, going down the mountainside, all the way to the ocean. And it's not exactly a cause for the, maybe it's gravity, the cause. But the water doesn't have to carry the cause within itself, except it kind of goes along with gravity. But it has to be on the hillside. There can't be obstacles.

So the principle is beginning to recognize what we want to pay attention to. And the key aspect also of this *upanisā*, *upanisā* path, is noticing, is being mindful and being present to the details, to the specifics, to the signposts, to know what to pay attention to.

And it's a remarkable thing to pay attention to suffering. I've had friends who taught mindfulness-based stress reduction, you know, these eight-week courses, and they would tell people to feel their pain, and they would get furious at the instructor. I'm here not to feel pain. You're telling me to feel it? And some of my friends had people walk out and never come back, because it's so foreign to some people that they're supposed to turn towards suffering.

But that's what we're asked to do. It's a very brave thing to do, a courageous thing to do. And somehow, without sitting close to suffering, something positive can't happen in relationship to it. And I love this idea that maybe the word *upanisā* means to sit close to, to sit close to, and to learn to see, to learn to be mindful of, to be present for. That's all we're being asked to do.

And that understanding, that being present for and seeing, is radically different than being the suffering. Knowing suffering is different than being suffering. Seeing suffering, being mindful of it, it's not the same as sinking and drowning in suffering.

And sitting close to suffering with this mindfulness practice, at some point that's the proximate condition, that's the underlying influence that strengthens faith, then confidence. And that's the underlying condition for the valuation, that's saying, oh, this is good. I'm glad. I appreciate this process. And so the instructions here are, notice that. Notice the appreciation. Be present for it. Notice the gladness. Notice the inspiration it provides.

But keep doing the noticing. Keep doing the practice. And as we notice the appreciation and that fuels us and guides us, then we can maybe get, if we find that the mindfulness practice, the practice of being really present, starts building some momentum. And that momentum is experienced as a kind of joy, joy of being carried along in a nice way. And then there's tranquility. When things are good, something deep inside has a chance to rest and relax. And then there's a happiness, a well-being.

And certainly, in my early years of Buddhist practice, I had no idea that we could be nourished and supported by these good feelings. In fact, I always got the message the opposite. They were a problem. You shouldn't have it. They're the working of Māra. One more thing to let go of. Don't indulge in feeling good when you meditate.

But in fact, in the teaching of the Buddha, you're not supposed to indulge in it for sure, but to be supported by it, to sit near it, sit near your well-being, sit close to it, so its influence can benefit you. And then *samādhi*, unified mind, lets all our intelligence operate, so our capacity for attention can be at the highest possible level. That's what Nyanatiloka's article said. It's coordinated with all these other attentional faculties. They all come together to support a real, not just being absorbed, but really paying attention again to the details of the experience, to really be present.

So *samādhi* doesn't become just a confused or just a vague thing to feel, just, oh, this feels so good, it's harmonious, it's wonderful, I feel one or something. But with mindfulness, the idea is to really learn the details of what's there. So like in the jungle, you start to see where the trail is, you follow the footprints of the animals, or you see places where you start to, you know, recognize where you are and the details of it.

And as we kind of begin to look at the details, then the details of what builds up human experience are the sensations, the simple acts of knowing, seeing, the momentary knowing of a thought arising. And as we start seeing the details that build up the concepts, the edifices of thought and philosophy and beliefs and stories, we start going back down to the building blocks of our experience, the raw building blocks of sensations and stuff. We see how much becoming there is, constant becoming, constant renewal, constantly new, arising and passing, coming and going.

And this, the insight into the arising and passing, is a powerful insight. In the **Upanisa Sutta**, it's described as the insight that's going to lead to the ending of something called the *āsavas*, sometimes translated as taints. And in particular, seeing how the constructed nature of the mind, how we construct ourselves, our idea of selves, how we construct our stories, construct so many different things, identity sometimes, how we construct other people, projecting identities on them, and construct futures and pasts. To understand that construction is part of this coming and going, arising and passing, this is considered to be the core insight.

Right now it's in the stage of seeing the knowledge and vision of becoming, which is onward leading, and it grows. But this is the, so there's two things now. There's basic mindfulness being present for what is, supported by this whole path. And now this mindfulness begins having insight. And that insight begins having its own effect on us.

There starts to be a disenchantment. There starts to be a fading away of clinging. And the reason for that is because this insight into arising and passing is starting to have an effect on us. It's influencing us.

If you are trying to bring home to your friends a gallon of water and all you have is your hands to hold it in, so you grab a fistful of water, you go home and show it to your friends, by the time you get there, there's nothing in there. So you go back and do it again, and again, and again. At some point, you see that it doesn't work. At some point, when we start seeing this arising and passing of phenomena, this kind of really simple, basic perceptual level, there's a lot of clinging we have that doesn't work anymore.

And so there begins to be a lessening, and kind of a loss of interest in clinging and in some of the things we cling to. And so the insight into things arising and passing, their transient nature, keeps growing. And then at some point it leads to a deep letting go, *vimutti*, deep release.

Okay. And so you'd think that would be the end. And now you should live happily ever after. It's the end of the story. You're completely free, and why bother with anything else?

There is one more step, and that is the knowledge of what has ended, knowing what the transformation is, knowing that you're out of the jungle, knowing you're out of danger of suffering from your own clinging. And so here again, we're back to the details. Yes, it isn't just important to be liberated. You have to understand what's happened to you, how you've been changed.

And in fact, in a variety of steps in this process, the overall process of practice, there's a number of changes that people can have. Right? And things fall away. It's good to know that.

It's inspiring, it gives confidence, it fuels the path, but also it begins seeing how this works. We can get clearer and clearer, oh, this path works, this is how it works. See in this way, and something begins to loosen, to dissolve, to let go, to fade away.

And so I'm starting having a clear sense of, and then there's going to be a confidence that, oh, this change is good. This is really good. Maybe there are ways that this letting go of clinging, the degree to which it's happened, now can grow. Maybe the system has other places where there's attachments. They can let go too. They can begin softening.

The principle that this whole path is operating under is that it is possible to let go of all clinging. And in doing that, bring to an end all suffering that's based on clinging. There might be emotional pain still in life, but all suffering based on attachment is gone.

And the Buddha said something like, the paraphrase that he said, something like, if I believed that it's not possible to bring a full end to suffering, I wouldn't teach you to do so. But I know it's possible. And so I teach you to do so. So he has this tremendous confidence because he knows it for himself.

And there are people who have gone through and experienced degrees of this ending, many degrees of suffering, many areas of suffering, and they know it's possible. And so we come to this ending. Sometimes the ending in the text, the translation of it, is destruction. But I don't think, it doesn't, sometimes maybe it feels like it destroys some things, but more likely it just comes to an end, stops, ceases, it releases fully.

And so there's a few things that can end. So I think I'm obligated to provide five. The first is ignorance. And so the ignorance then is not lack of knowledge, book knowledge, lack of understanding concepts about Buddhism, but the inability to see clearly.

See clearly what? See clearly the inconstancy, the arising and passing of phenomena as they occur before we put a concept on top of it to make it more static. And in doing that, then some people will often say that it's not just arising and passing we see, but in that flow of arising and passing, we also see that if there's craving or clinging or grasping, that adds to the suffering. So we see much that's described in the *Four Noble Truths*, which sees that there's suffering, there is arising, and there's grasping in relationship to it, craving. And then that also disappears.

And it's quite something to have the experience of watching suffering arise. And when it arises, it's just arising. And then it passes. It's just passing. And to see that repeatedly, coming and going, it really starts breaking up the strong authority invested in suffering, that it's solid, it's permanent, I'll always be this way. It's fixed. It's fixed.

So part of the ignorance that comes to an end is an ignorance called the delusion of permanence. It's always going to be this way. There is, then what comes to an end is selfishness, self-centeredness, including all kinds of beliefs, philosophies, views that imply or insist that there is a kind of core, solid, existential self. There's something in there that really is me, absolutely.

And sometimes that solid sense of me is unreflective, meaning just kind of intuitively we feel like there must be a me here, and it feels solid, complete. And because of that solidity, what makes it solid is a kind of holding on to this idea, holding on to the sense of me, this is truly me. And it's remarkable to give talks on not-self and hear the intense protests of people that this can't be true, that, you know, people have very strong opinions about there is a self. I'm a, you know, and I sympathize with them because I think some of the Buddhist teachings on what's called no-self don't really represent the teachings very well. It's better called not-self.

But anyway, the selfishness, the self-centeredness gets abated because all those represent some kind of clinging, some kind of grabbing on, holding on to something that's supposed to be permanent. Delusion of permanence comes into play around the solidity of self. And so what comes to an end are those things. Selfishness comes to an end. Self-centeredness comes to an end.

And one of the wonderful, charming things about developing, growing in the *Dharma*, and attaining some of these states of realization that could be really good for the ego to have, is that it doesn't really matter anymore to the self that you have attained any level. The orientation around it is not about who you become in that process and how you're seen or what kind of badge you can wear. There's no meaning in that. What has meaning is freedom. What has meaning is the end of suffering and the path, being on the path and continuing on the path.

So another ending is kind of living in the world craving worldly experiences. One of the taints that come to an end is said to be *kāmatanḥā*, that thirst or desire for *kāma*. Sometimes that's considered to be just sensual pleasures. But *kāma* is kind of a stand-in for the, we live in the *kāmaloka*. Human beings live in the world of *kāma*, the world of sense experiences.

And some people think the best thing in the world is to have really great sense experiences. You know, parachute jumping, riding roller coasters, taking drugs, alcohol, I mean, you name it. There are so many wonderful things that the world provides us we can do in Santa Cruz. Why be on a retreat?

Do we sometimes hear the train whistle here at IRC? We do, right? You could take the train up into the mountains here, and it's kind of beautiful and exciting. And at least when I took it at some point, the cowboys come out on the horses and with guns to rob the train. It's really, you know, it's so much fun.

You can go down the street here to the, what's it called, the spot, what's the, *Mystery Spot*. Oh. It's a powerful place. Part of it, they have a vortex. Then you might leave dizzy. Reality is different down there. I mean, there are so many fun things to do.

And so this attachment to this world of *kāma* is very, very intense and strong. When this whole *upanisā* process comes to an end, the attachment to all that falls away, stops.

The fourth thing that falls away is hostility, hatred, and wanting to harm anyone. The attachment to wanting to cause harm comes to a stop. I think that's phenomenally good news, that that's possible. The amount of harm that's being done by humans to other humans intentionally, called cruelty sometimes, it's just mind-blowing how much goes on in our world. But imagine that that instinct, you know, I think sometimes it's deeply instinctual to cause harm. You know, it's probably in our DNA, that capacity. But to have that come to an end is phenomenal. And to walk through the world not causing any harm intentionally.

I love the line in the **Dhammapada** that describes a sage as someone who walks through the world like a bee gathering nectar without harming the flower.

And then the fifth one that comes to an end is passivity, kind of giving up, a kind of inertia, a kind of, you know, just sitting quietly in your enlightened cave and thinking that that's all you have to do, is sit here blissed out or peaceful, that there's nothing to do. There's something different, there's something between or beyond being passive and being active. And that is a profound responsiveness to the world. Maybe passivity and assertion is maybe the pair. There's responsiveness.

When the clinging is not there, when the selfishness is not there, self-centeredness is not there, in a way it's kind of like self and other, that line, that barrier that's between it, kind of disappears. There's a deeper sensitivity, deeper knowing, deeper understanding. And it's kind of like, you know, if you're uncomfortable sitting in your chair, you change your posture. If someone trips as you're walking down the road and has trouble standing up, you help them stand. You ask them, how are you? Can I give you a hand?

Not because we should, but most of the time, unless it's here in the meditation center, if you want to adjust your posture on a chair, you don't ask anyone, should I do that? Am I allowed to do that? It's just kind of a nice little simple way of taking care of yourself. So the same way

with the world. It's just a nice simple way that we respond.

It doesn't have to be with horror. It doesn't have to be with anger. It doesn't have to be with distress. It doesn't have to be with a broken heart. Compassion is one of the most beautiful emotions that we have. And when the conditions are right, we can feel how sweet it is. Compassion doesn't cause us to suffer more. It does the opposite.

So these things come to an end. Clinging ends, ignorance ends, attachment to experience ends. The tradition talks about even attachment to being alive ends, not because dying is better. Being alive is good. It's really good. It can be. But the attachment to life can get in the way, in a big-time way.

So in the end, all these things end. But what's left? What doesn't disappear? What doesn't end? What doesn't end is, and then the way it's described in the ancient texts, is peace. There's a profound sense of peace. There's not agitation. There's not inner conflict, not inner struggle. The heart's at peace.

What remains is happiness. People have come to know that these things have come to an end. What can make the world happy? I love it that in the ancient texts they say that sometimes they describe a little story where some non-Buddhists are describing the Buddhist monastics. And one of the odd characteristics they have is they are smiling a lot. Isn't that kind of a nice way to remember, 2,500 years later? We're still talking about them smiling a lot. Happy.

What remains is confidence. The ancient texts talk about how someone who is fully awakened, fully released from all this, walks through the world confident, sits with confidence, stands with confidence, lies down with confidence. Meaning in all the different ways you have to be, there's a confidence just to be here and be present and be free. Imagine falling asleep with confidence.

And then there's care. *Anukampā* remains. And that's quite explicit when the Buddha said to the first 60 people who were fully awakened, they're probably wondering, what do we do now? He said, go forth out of care for the world, for all the people and beings and *devas*, and go forth for the welfare and happiness, with care, with care for them.

And then also what remains, and then I think it's important to say, is you remain, the person remains. I think the whole premise, in my eyes, the whole premise of Buddhist practice is how important it is to support a person to become free. Not so that a person can disappear into some kind of amorphous not-self thing, but so the person can really be present fully as themselves, as a fully inhabited, fully embodied person, peaceful, happy, kind of what this personhood is, without any self-centeredness, without any self-preoccupation. But what

remains is the person to walk through the world, to care for the world.

And part of the reason to be confident is to know what has stopped. To know maybe at first that to some degree you're not liable to pick up certain attachments. You're not likely to react in ways you used to react. You know how to be present. You have an increased capacity for being in challenging situations without some kind of harmful, instinctual response that makes the whole situation worse, some confidence that we can stay peaceful and wise and caring.

And then with this process of practice, that confidence grows and grows. And we find that more and more we're confident that we can do this. And we know we can do it. We know what's ended. Then we can go further and further on the *Dharma* path.

So it's not just about being free. It's also knowing what has come to an end. Sometimes the desire to see the Buddhist path as all about just the freedom that we're going to attain as an experience fits in too close to this *kāmaloka*, *kāmatanḥā*, that it's all about having a good experience. It's all about experience as having a good experience. And so enlightenment must be the best experience. I can't wait to have that experience.

It's not about experience. It's about what we're free from, and how then we're free to care for this world.