

Monday Dharma talk

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August 31, 2026

Keywords: *satipaṭṭhāna, nibbāna, dukkha, samādhi, Vipassanā, Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Four Ways of Establishing Awareness, Bhikkhu Anālayo, Bhikkhu Sujato, Mahāsi Sayadaw*

When I was a child, a number of times I remember seeing dolphins playing in the water, playing in the waves, playing in the water. Certainly, it seemed like they were having a good time playing.

Also, when I was a child, there were times I was called a dolphin because, in the summer months, I spent much of the days during the summer in the sea. One of the favorite things I liked doing was diving down to maybe six, seven, or eight feet under the water, and kind of staying at the sea bottom as best I could, as long as I could. Looking up, I would turn over, flip over on my back, and I just loved watching the waves above. Sometimes the waves above me would be breaking, and there was kind of a commotion and things. But below, looking up, it looked so peaceful and quiet, content.

So, most of us are not swimming in oceans, but we are swimming in awareness. We are completely surrounded by what awareness knows. There is a funny way in which—not quite right to say this—but the way that we kind of experience it is that awareness radiates out into everything that we see and hear and touch. It extends that far. Literally, probably it does not. Light comes, sound waves come, and they stimulate nerves, and then we reconstruct them in our brain.

But that is less meaningful for me than the idea that I am swimming in an ocean of awareness, swimming in an ocean of knowing and sensing and feeling. A lot of what *satipaṭṭhāna*, with all this detailed practice of mindfulness, is doing is helping us understand and see clearly what is already happening. It lets it stand out and highlights, in clarity, that we are, in fact, constantly knowing and seeing and feeling. Part of the richness of human life can be to live close to that. Stay close to the streams, the rivers of awareness that go on, instead of getting sidetracked in the irrigation channels of the hindrances and all kinds of other preoccupations.

That somehow dries out the rivers, dries out those inner streams of knowing and feeling and sensing that are so intimately and closely tied to the experience of being alive. I sometimes talk about staying close to the lived experience. The Buddha said that those who are attentive live in the deathless, that which does not die. Those who are inattentive are as if already dead. It is kind of a powerful metaphor. So, stay here in the lived experience.

The way that this is kind of celebrated, I would say, is in the opening of the discourse on the four, usually called the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. I like to translate it as the *Four Ways of Establishing Awareness*. So, if you translate *bhikkhu* as practitioners: “Practitioners, there is a path of convergence.” *Ekāyano ayaṃ, bhikkhave, maggo*, translated as convergence rather than confluence.

There is a path of convergence to purify sentient beings, overcome sorrow and crying, make an end of pain and sadness, realize the practice, and witness release, to witness *nibbāna*. Namely, the four ways of establishing awareness.

So, this is a phenomenal intention, purpose for what this practice is about. First, this kind of convergence. There are so many meanings, so many suggestions of what that means, but I like to think of it as being a unification, the coming together of all of who we are. One way of understanding it with the four ways of establishing awareness is that it brings all these four major areas of our life together, and so they are all kind of operating in harmony and working together: body, feelings, mind, and the mental behaviors, mental activities that we live in.

Other ways of understanding this convergence are that no matter which of these four areas of mindfulness you dip into, this is the ocean you swim in and really explore and feel and get to know. You dive into it deeply and flip over on your back and look up from the depth of the peace and look at this world, experience it. You will see, in some profound, meaningful way, change: the changing nature of this world, the changing nature of our direct experience. The more you can see the change, the more you will experience for yourself that this is a river. A river of time, a river of sensations, rivers of thoughts, rivers of experience, rivers of perception.

It is all kind of constantly flowing and moving and shifting and changing. To really converge there is to see that everything, all the *Dharma*, somehow converges on a very deep and profound experience of inconstancy and change in direct experience. It is not something to think about, but something to experience. It is just like you would not kind of float down a river happily only thinking about the river. You can have a good time fantasizing, but the lived experience is to float in the river, to be in it, to really know it.

So, we have all these streams that we live in, and the convergence—they come together. Sometimes in the *sūtras*, they even have analogies or metaphors of the rivers coming together. They come together and become the big Ganges River, and eventually the river flows into the ocean. We are all rivers. All rivers come together and unify.

This idea of overcoming sorrow is usually translated as lamentation. This translation I borrowed was “crying,” but that is too modest. One of the biggest criers who ever cried in this hall was Bhikkhu Anālayo, sitting in that seat right there. He was in the middle of a *Dharma* talk and started sobbing. We were all kind of surprised, but it was kind of out of character for who he was, who he is. We were all silent as he sobbed.

It happened just like that because he was talking about his teacher, and his teacher had died. It was kind of like he finally had a teacher, and the teacher died before he met him. So he started sobbing, and then, just as fast as he started, it stopped. He just continued where the sentence left off. It was like he was not embarrassed, he was not troubled. As far as we could tell, he was just—I do not think he was suffering.

Crying can happen lots of times, but lamentation is a kind of despairing cry, crying and sorrowing in a despairing, hopeless, anguished way. I think that is what it is talking about here. Something really deep: anguish. It is all too easy to experience in this world we live in. Every day, we meet people who go through this and have it in a deep way.

We have known many people who have such deep sorrow, anguish, and despair, and rather than experiencing their own deeply, they inflict it on others. They harm others because of it. For this practice here to really purify that, to clarify that, to clean that, to work with that, is such a powerful thing. We have a practice that does this, that can meet it. It is meant to meet that side of us, if it is there, to make an end of suffering and sadness, to make an end of suffering.

For some people, this is the purpose of Buddhist practice. Part of the purpose of Buddhist practice is to do it for ourselves, and part of the purpose is to do it for ourselves so we can do it for others. If you want to teach someone a foreign language and you have not learned it yourself, then how well does it work? If you want to teach someone to swim but you have not learned to swim, you can be downright dangerous for them. You explain to them some ideas about moving your arms and throw them in.

But to know your suffering yourself well, and understand it, and understand what it takes to go through it to the other side, and have confidence in that process—and share that confidence with others so they can do it—is a great gift. To realize the practice and witness release,

the release from all suffering, the release from all clinging—it is a phenomenal thing.

So, there are these things. The way to it is, namely, the four. This path: there is a path of convergence, namely, the four ways of establishing awareness. So, it is quite a promise for what mindfulness does, what the path of awareness does, that it can have such a purifying, releasing, freeing effect on people.

I love that it is naming really deep emotional challenges that people have. That is not left out. It is not like philosophical issues, where you are going to understand the perfect philosophy of emptiness and then eventually you can just ignore your sadness and despair because you know it must be empty too. But that is not what it says. It says, here, we are meeting it. We are being present for it all of our life.

Then it goes on to say, what are these four ways of establishing awareness?

Here, a practitioner is aware of the body in terms of just the body, keen, aware, clearly knowing, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. Aware of feelings in terms of just feelings, keen, aware, and clearly understanding, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. Aware of the mind in terms of just the mind, keen, aware, and clearly understanding, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. Aware of mental behavior in terms of mental behavior, keen, aware, and mindful, clearly understanding, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world.

So, here it is listing these four. It goes along with the idea of being keen, ardent—the usual translation. This is what you are doing. Set, inspired. Yes, this is what we are engaged in. This is the purpose. This is what we are here to do. Let's meet these things. Be aware of it. Clearly understand what this is.

Then it describes: “And how does a practitioner observe the body in terms of the body?” So then it begins talking about mindfulness or awareness of breathing. It is when a practitioner, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down cross-legged, sets their body straight, and brings mindfulness to the present. Just aware, they breathe in. Just aware, they breathe out.

I am very fond of this simple beginning instruction: set the body straight and bring mindfulness to the present, mindfulness or awareness to the present, awareness to the fore. This is Bhikkhu Sujato's translation. The word can also be translated as establish. Have awareness settled here. Bring it in, establish it here, root it here. Be settled in your awareness.

Know that being aware is important. It is not incidental. Be interested in being that dolphin

in the ocean of awareness, to explore, to be, to feel, to sense, to be in that lived experience of our senses, all the ways in which we can be aware in the present. Discover how it works for you. It is happening anyway.

It does help if we shift our interest from what we are thinking about, from all the drama, all the stories, all the analysis, all the plans, all the figuring out, all the negotiating and navigating our experience that we do, to the idea of simple awareness, simply here. So, we are not caught up in the streams of reactivity, the streams of preoccupation, the streams of figuring things out, the streams of fixing and making and getting and thinking, the streams of self-consciousness that we live in.

I think one of the things that greatly supported me in my practice, I only realized, luckily, after the fact. I did not know how much it was helping me. But when I was introduced to Zen, there was a huge emphasis on posture, and it has been a lifelong issue for me. But that is good because it kept me interested, kept me kind of close to it, close enough to it.

So, I spent so much of my last fifty years practicing mindfulness of the body. It has almost become second nature for me. It is kind of like it is always there, without even focusing on it. It is always there. Mindfulness of breathing has also been such a familiar area for me. It is always there, and so it protects me from getting caught up in my thoughts, getting lost in my thoughts, because something else is going on here.

Something else is actually reminding me, “Come back, be here, don’t be there.” What I eventually learned in doing this practice, I first started learning when I was at the three-month retreat at IMS, was the lovely art of not exactly ignoring—well, kind of like ignoring—thinking. Let the thoughts be in the background. I had thought that it is either you have thoughts or you do not have thoughts. If you have thoughts, you have to address them and do something with them and fix them and, like, duke it out with them.

But I learned that you can just leave them alone. Do not be so interested in them. Let them be kind of a background for meditation. So, you are not negotiating. Chances are, a somewhat high percentage of the thoughts that you have that might seem relatively important this minute, in a week you will not know what they were. Someone is going to ask you, “Tell me, at 4:27 last Monday, a week ago, what were you thinking?”

Well, maybe you will say, “I was thinking about the talk,” but there are all kinds of thoughts you will not remember you had. If you are having some really phenomenally valuable thoughts that the whole world should know about, well, that is one thing. But how often have you had those thoughts? Chances are that you have better things to do when you are

meditating than being a dolphin in your thoughts, living in your thoughts, concerned with your thoughts.

But you also do not have to deny them. You also do not have to push them away and try to shut them down, shut them up. They are just part of the bigger picture, and they can be in the background. Sometimes, when you are sitting meditating, there are sounds in the room or sounds outside, and sometimes they are just background and have no impact on you. So, imagine it can be that way with your thoughts.

What I learned was to leave the thoughts alone. Do not be so concerned with them, and something settled anyway, in spite of them. That was very different from the way I was duking it out with them and trying to stop them and doing all kinds of other things. Just leave them alone. There is this art in mindfulness, I think, of learning how to be mindful of something without being caught in its orbit, without being caught in its gravitational pull. Or maybe that is saying it too politely: without you getting caught by it, by you holding on to it or reacting to it.

I learned something like this when I was in Burma. Whenever the Burmese *Vipassanā* teachers taught you how to be mindful, it was kind of like this: we were told to stay with your breathing; that was the primary focus. If something else becomes predominant, you were supposed to let go of your breathing and attend to this other thing, be mindful of it. That is a common understanding. We teach that here too.

However, when they taught it, every time seemingly they taught it, you go back to the books of Mahāsi Sayadaw, every time he is writing about it in the books, he is saying, “Just note it twice, and then come back to the breathing.” “Pain, pain, come back to your breathing.” For years, for a long time, I just thought that they were doing shorthand for, “Just stay there and note for however long it is there.” At some point, I wondered, maybe that is what they mean. Maybe all you are supposed to do is acknowledge it clearly, and then start again with the breathing.

What I saw in myself was that if I stayed for a long time with something, unconsciously, kind of, I started reacting to it or having thoughts about it or judgments about it or judgments about me in relationship to it. There was a whole little universe that started to kind of bubble up around this thing that I was trying to be mindful of. Because I had so much time with it, I could get in trouble.

What turned out to be a lot nicer overall—I mean, sometimes that is really good practice. I am not saying do not do that. But there is also this, what they said in Burma: just note it twice

and come back. I have sometimes been taught recently to just note it for four or five breaths. That is being more generous than the Burmese. Four or five breaths, that is probably safe, and then come back.

So, all the associations, all the reactions, all the complicated relationships we create with it maybe do not get formed. Or, if they do start getting formed, you are kind of letting go of it early, before it has gotten locked in, and come back. You are kind of freer of it. Come back to your breathing. You can always go back to it for a little bit, back and forth.

But this back and forth means that nothing becomes such a big deal. Nothing gets locked in. Nothing gets like a project that you are going to work on. It is just something to know. That is kind of the goal here. It is just something to know, simply, something to know in a relaxed way.

The instructions I gave this morning—I hope that some of you could experiment with this—are that whatever you are aware of, whatever you are sensing or feeling in your body, whatever it is, the object of mindfulness, do not change it. Do not do anything with it. Just know it. But what you can try changing is relaxing your knowing. Have calm knowing. Relax the way you are feeling.

So, in feeling it, there is kind of space and softness around it. But do not do anything to the thing. That is what we can relax. Relax the knowing. Do not have a project, except that one.

Okay, so how do we? Okay, here it is: “I am feeling sad, and I should not feel sad. It is wrong to be sad on a retreat. It is embarrassing,” or it is all these complicated things. But no, instead, know that you are sad. Feel the sadness. Maybe feel it for four or five breaths. Maybe know it for four or five breaths.

During that time, see if the knowing can be calm. See if the knowing can be free of projects. See if the knowing can be free of baggage, all these different associations that come along with it. Just knowing. See how simple it can be. Sensing, same thing.

No project. No big, powerful piercing of reality to have insights. Just simple sensation. The work of the practice is not with what you are aware of. The work of the practice is how you relax and soften the sensing and the knowing.

Why is that important? Why is that useful? Because the *Dharma* is onward-leading. There is a way in which this *Dharma* practice gets out of the way of some profound inner processing that goes on, that helps us move through. It allows that we do not have to be the doer, or we do not have to be the engineer. We do not have to be the one trying to make anything happen in the *Dharma*.

We are creating the conditions so that we can trust the *Dharma* within us to be onward-leading, to call us here: pay attention here, open here, feel this, be with this. Partly, how this works may sound a little bit reductionistic, but a lot of the tensions, a lot of the *dukkha* we have, come in forms of clinging and grasping and holding and tension and contractions. The nature of all contractions is to want to relax, to open. It takes work to be contracted. It takes work to be reactive.

It takes work to build up a conceit. It takes work to build up projects and agendas and things we are trying to do and fix and adjust. It takes work to be the best meditator at IRC. It takes work to be the worst meditator at IRC. Why do all this work? The movement of this kind of effort is to want to relax.

We are pumping it up; it wants to soften. So, if we can get out of the way, just know it in this simple way, the movement of relaxing can happen. It is really fun to discover that all you have to do is stay aware but get out of the way. Some people like the analogy of a ball rolling down a hill. Get out, take away what blocks the ball, and the ball will roll.

When I was on retreat many years ago, my analogy was that it was a snowball going down the snowbank, and it would get bigger as it rolled. It just felt like I was getting more and more into the practice. More and more, the *Dharma* qualities were just growing as I sat. That is the other thing: if we get out of the way, there are all kinds of things that can grow, the *Dharma* growth within us. There is a growth of peace, a growth of faith, a growth of awareness.

There may be growth of kindness and love, growth of wisdom, patience, growth of concentration, of *samādhi*, of unification. So, it is not just that some things unravel, that the contraction is let go. There are natural forces inside of us that want to grow, given half a chance. It is the nature of these things to grow if the conditions are right. The best conditions are just getting out of the way of yourself.

How? By being aware. You have to stay aware. You have to be in the present moment. That is where the magic is. There are so many things in life that you have to be in the present moment to get the benefits of. This is true in mindfulness, but not with strain.

Discover yourself, and be able to recognize in yourself that you are aware, to know that you are aware. You can only do that as a present-moment phenomenon. To be aware of being aware. To be aware of sensing and feeling. To be aware of staying with the breath.

Then, is that way that you are aware clear? Can it be clean? Can it be open? Can it be soft? Can it be calm? Can it be peaceful? Can it be relaxed?

Maybe at least one of those words is nice for you. Here, it involves a radical shift from business

as usual for most people. A radical shifting of what lane you are on. You no longer may be going in the fast lane, or you are not going on the freeway where you do not see anything. Now, you are going on a nice, quiet country road where you see the trees and the plants and the animals. We have time to look around and see.

You are not anxiously holding onto the steering wheel, navigating fast, difficult traffic. There is a shift, as we sit here, to sensing and feeling, observing and relaxing. I saw, when I was looking at Bhikkhu Sujato's translation, that the word "relax," or "making tranquil"—some people translate it as he translates it, "stilling"—is the stilling of the body formations, stilling of the body tensions.

So, a practitioner, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down cross-legged, sits with their body straight, and brings mindfulness to the present. Just aware, they breathe in. Just aware, they breathe out.

There is something, I think, beautiful about how this is worded grammatically. It does not say, "Be aware of the present, and now focus on the breathing. Be aware of the breathing." It does not say that. It says, establish awareness in the present. Being aware, there happens to be breathing in. There happens to be breathing out.

It is almost as if breathing is coming into awareness, rather than awareness going to the breathing. Breathing, but it is not a project. It is not a bearing down. It is very simple.

Then Bhikkhu Sujato goes to the next one. It is a little unusual, too, how he translates it. Usually, it says, breathing in long, one knows; breathing out long, one knows. Breathing in long. He translates it as breathing in heavily. One knows, "I am breathing in heavily," the heavy breath.

Then he says, breathing in a light breath, one knows, "I am breathing in a light breath." His understanding is that the difference is that, as you are meditating, your breath gets lighter and lighter, maybe shorter and shorter. But he is putting the emphasis on lighter. When heavy means strong breathing, heavy breathing, because we are busy, we are anxious, we have done a lot of work. I find it an interesting, different way of saying it.

Here, the language is to know: "I know I am breathing out heavily." The way the Pāli is written, they have the equivalent of English quotation marks, like someone saying this to themselves. There is a kind of—not that you have to say it to yourself—"I am breathing in heavy, breathing out, breathing in light." But the idea is that it is kind of very intentional, or clear, or purposeful to be aware. Kind of clearly here, but very simple.

The way I am saying it here is to be aware simply, relaxedly, softly, openly. It is almost like, by

being aware, you are making breathing room around whatever is happening. “Oh, it is like this now. It is like this now. Nothing more. It is like this now.”

“But it should be more. I should, I should, I should see it more deeply. I should be one with it, or I should be this and that with it.” No, no. Just, this is how it is now. I know it this way. I will know this in this nice way, a relaxed way, here.

Finally, leaving your thoughts in the background, if you can, if you can, where you do not worry about them, you are not involved in them—maybe your mind can just have its own thoughts, and you can have an agreement with it: “I will leave you alone. You can have your own thoughts if you leave me alone.” Quietly, the mind is chatting away, just like some person in another room who is having a conversation that has nothing to do with you.

That is a pretty radical idea. Most people think every thought is important, and every thought about yourself is crucially important. After all, you are an important subject. But maybe there can be a shift. Maybe there is a reorientation to a different lane on the highway, or a different lane, a different road. Maybe there is a real reprioritizing of what is important here.

Whatever thoughts can do for you, maybe for now they are not going to do the most important thing. They might help you a little bit on the side. They might be cheerleaders. They might give you some encouragement. But the real work is to really shift into the streams of the present moment, into the streams of breathing—the changing, shifting sensations of breathing in and breathing out, of taking a step and putting the foot down, walking down the steps.

If you are walking down the steps from here, stay in the flow of all the sensations that have to come into play as you are doing the steps, as opposed to already thinking about what is next. Being by the teacup, or what you are going to do with tea, or what you are going to go look at or do. Stay here. Stay close.

Stay close to where sensations and knowing can be in the stream, the flow, the river, the ocean of now. If you are here and now enough—a simple awareness, simple discovery—what happens when you are aware? What comes into awareness with no projects? What comes into awareness? How simple can you be with it?

How can you shift your awareness so it is softer and more unencumbered, not being recruited for a big project? A meditation project. Just here.