

Wednesday Dharma talk

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So, part of the purpose of this practice, I propose, is for you to be able to track yourself, monitor yourself, and be aware of yourself well enough that you can be your own teacher, that you can find your own way here. And that *satipaṭṭhāna* is for the areas of mindfulness, the attention, are maybe very useful or important domains of attention for that purpose.

You could, for example, probably do an intimate study of your little toe and go to graduate school and get a Ph.D. on the intricacies and varieties of little toes and people's feet. It could be a whole study. But the chances are, that's not going to teach you how to live your life more wisely—just a little bit wiser, maybe. But that doesn't open up to all the domains of life and what we have to navigate, to negotiate.

But if you really pay attention to your body, if you pay attention to the feeling tones, if you pay attention to your mind states, if you pay attention to your—I call it these days—the mental behavior in what goes on in the mind, that's a place where you can have potential for a lot of understanding. It is a kind of understanding that, if you see clearly what's going on, you can be wise about what you do next, what you do with that. You can be your own teacher. You find your way.

A few things about this are meaningful for me. Part of this is that we're using our intelligence for that purpose. You're allowed to use whatever intelligence you have to find your way. To find your way to peace, to find your way to freedom, to find your way to wholeness, to wholeness.

One of the things that the Buddha in the *sūtras* does frequently is offer images for the practice. That's a whole different part of our intelligence: our capacity to conceive and perceive, invent, and come up with images that somehow represent what we're doing here in a supportive way. Some people find it very useful to have images of the practice. It kind of makes it come alive in a different way.

I've known people who've imagined their breathing to be the wings of an eagle, breathing in and out. I felt sometimes that my breathing was like a jellyfish. Somehow, this image of a

jellyfish expanding in all directions, going through the water, was very nice for me.

One image that comes to mind today is teachings about how much effort to make in practice. The Buddha uses the example of the lute string. You want it not too tight, not too loose. But when I think of that metaphor, that image, I think about what the lute is for. The lute is for making beautiful music.

So you tune every string for a purpose: to do something beautiful. And so maybe we're tuning ourselves, attuning to ourselves through this practice. The careful attention to ourselves is a kind of becoming attuned to ourselves. Maybe it's with awareness. Maybe we're attuning, tuning in our awareness, not too strong, not too weak. Maybe that's where the beauty is, in how we're aware.

I was reminded in one of the practice discussions today of the metaphor, the analogy, that the Buddha uses for the four foundations of mindfulness. He calls it the ancestral homeland. It may be meaningful that I often think of mindfulness using the metaphor or analogy of a home. I feel very much at home when I'm sitting here, very attentive and present for my direct experience. It's a homecoming, because that's kind of cozy for me and nice.

But maybe the Buddha seems to have preferred natural settings. So he has a natural saying: the homeland, kind of the land that you come from. Mindfulness is like your homeland. It's much bigger than a home. It has no walls, necessarily.

So what does it take to come home, to come to the homeland? So that mindfulness is not a chore. Mindfulness is not—you're not importing this idea of mindfulness from outside of you and trying to do something. But rather, it's kind of waking up to who you are. Being present here with all your intelligence operating.

One of the principles for this being your own teacher is, in fact, to be able to know for yourself what is wholesome and unwholesome. Simplistically, maybe some people will emphasize stress and not stress, but wholesome is kind of something that is healthy for us. To use that as a criterion.

So there's a whole series of teachings that the Buddha gave. I'll give you one example, which I think is very poignant. Buddhism is often associated with letting go, with renunciation. The Buddha says, if renouncing increases the unwholesome in you and decreases the wholesome, I don't tell you to let go that way, of that. But if letting go decreases the unwholesome and increases the wholesome, that's a good thing to let go of.

So this idea, I think, applies to a lot of different things. The idea that there's no definitive idea of what you should do—just let go of everything—it's very discerning. It's careful. It's

something we choose. We know what we're doing. We understand so well that we want to do it.

Of course, why should we harm ourselves? And to be really present, very attentive, to be attuned to oneself deeply. To be attuned is not just to know yourself, but to somehow resonate with yourself, or feel yourself, or be in some kind of harmony with yourself, so you can get the information of when you're out of tune. Information of what is out of tune here.

So this idea of images as part of our attentional faculty—that we can actually pay attention in a different way, sometimes in a richer way, when we have somehow an understanding, an image, a sense of what's going on—is built in right there in this text, in the four foundations of mindfulness. There are at least three images that the Buddha uses there. The first one has to do with mindfulness of breathing.

He says that you stay with the in-breath, the out-breath. If you think of it as a cycle of respiration, just stay there, right there. Stay close. How close? Like a lathe worker, someone who uses a lathe to carve wood, carve a bowl, for example.

The lathe is turning round and around, and so the bowl is turning around in a cycle. Then the person puts the point of a chisel, kind of knife, right there with carefully just the right pressure, just the right place, so that the wood gets carved as it turns around and around.

The Buddha says that just like a skilled woodturner or a woodturner's apprentice knows that they're making a long cut when they make a long cut, a short cut when they're making a short cut, they know what they're doing. They're tracking it, but probably it's all kind of intuitive. They know exactly what they're doing. They know what they're trying to do. They know when to make a long cut and a short cut.

But they're not planning it out. They're not thinking it out. They're not engineering it. They're not pulling out an engineering handbook to calculate how much pressure to put on. There's a whole bunch of intelligence that goes right there for someone who's skilled at what they're doing, to be attuned to what they're doing and to adjust.

You can't think it out. You have to rely on this wonderful mind of ours. It does so many things subconsciously, intuitively. It gathers all the information and kind of feels, knows what to do.

If a five-year-old girl falls on the playground and has a bloody knee, and it hurts, and she needs a bandage, she's crying and upset and scared. Somehow you're there, attending, attending. Maybe you're the schoolyard attendant, and it's your job to care for her. Do you pull out the schoolyard attendant manual? "Just a minute here, girl. I have to read up on you."

But you know to sit down with her and care for her, be attuned to her, and not be too close, not too far. Realize she's upset. She doesn't know who you are. How do you talk to her?

It's time to put the bandage on. There's a lot of care in approaching with a Band-Aid, knowing where to put it, how much pressure to put on, what's right for her, what's right for her. It's a sophisticated, complicated thing. But if you're attuned, you don't think about it at all. It's something in your system that kind of just knows how to do it.

The attunement the skilled lathe worker has with the wood and the knife, the attunement you can have staying very close—we're connected to the breath. That you stay there, be connected, stay with the cycle of breathing in, breathing out. I like the image, for myself, of waves washing up on the ocean, and they're kind of continuous. The in-breath is the waves washing up on the sand beach, and the exhale, they're washing away. But the contact of the water against the sand is continuous.

So I stay right there where the attention and the breathing is continuous, where we have a chance to be attuned to our breathing. What does that mean, to be attuned to the breathing here? And how do you know how close to get, how far to get, how intimate to be?

Sometimes it really works best to be very close, right up against the breath. Sometimes it works better to be like thirty feet away with the mind. Anything else, you feel like you're interfering and getting too complicated with it. How do you know? Because you're attuning to the effect it has on you.

You're paying attention. "Oh, if I get too close, I get tense. If I'm much further away, watching it, I'm more relaxed. Oh, if I'm too far away from it, my mind wanders off in thought. If I come closer, then I'm less likely to wander. Oh, this is nice."

So the kind of, "Oh, this is how. This is good. This is helpful." Then we look at how we're being discerning like that, trying too hard to figure out the right thing. "I have to do it right." Well, that feels unwholesome. That feels out of tune.

Is there a better way to do it? Can I do it open-endedly or relaxedly? Maybe I'm the five-year-old girl on the playground, so I have to be very tender and careful how I approach my breath. It takes some intelligence to see what works better for me to know the breathing. What works better for me right now is to feel and experience the breath in the body.

Different times, different days, different ones feel like this is the one that's good now. This feels better. This feels nice. So there's this constant attunement, where becoming attuned is using your awareness well.

That's where the lathe turner is a craftsperson. Sometimes that's the metaphor for mindfulness: you're developing a craft of attention. The craft is not you turning yourself into a virtuoso. Rather, the craft is what you can make beautiful—the awareness itself. Can you know in a way that feels nice and satisfying? It's kind of beautiful to know.

Can you sense? What would it be like to sense carefully, lovingly? Someone who's throwing clay pots has to really be present, touching, feeling, in order to make the art, the beautiful pot. They have to feel and sense so intimately and carefully. Can we feel with that kind of sensitivity and care and love of an artist, of a potter?

I think I'm saying all this because I think sometimes people who are taught mindfulness treat mindfulness as kind of like a—I don't know what—kind of like a sledgehammer. Some people have even reported, they come back and say that the relationship to thinking is like whack-a-mole. Every time a thought comes up, they whack it to try to get rid of it. That doesn't feel very beautiful. It doesn't feel very craftsman-like, crafts-like.

Then we come to the next exercise in *Satipaṭṭhāna*, which is very simple. There, too, for many years I just glazed over it when I read it because it's so simplistic. The exercise is: when standing, know you're standing. When walking, know you're walking. When sitting, know you're sitting. When lying down, know you're lying down.

The next line goes something like: whatever position is intended for the body, whatever intention you have for your posture, know it. So the idea of intentionality is at play. It doesn't say whatever posture you're in, know what it is, but whatever posture you intend. Intention is part of the attentional faculties we have—all the ones I listed yesterday—to have intention, to have a sense of purpose. Yes, this is what I'm doing.

And so when we sit down to meditate, if you're going to sit, I was delighted today. You know, in the last two days, many of you came to talk to me about what you do when you sit down to meditate, your practice. I was delighted by how many of you said one of the first things you do is pay attention to your posture. Checking in with your posture is how you get settled, how you arrive, how you begin entering into this world here in the present moment, the ancestral land.

I think there's something very helpful to be intentional with your posture. It kind of is part of the gathering. It's part of the arriving. It's part of the richness of all the different faculties that are coming into play, that are being gathered together, that are being mutually supportive here.

And so, to have a posture that's intentional, to choose a posture, and to sit down and spend

some time before you sit intentionally kind of aligning the posture, adjusting the posture. This is not just a ritual to begin. It's not just to get comfortable. It's part of the gathering of our attentional faculties, bringing together the richness of this inner life we have.

So it all helps us to become attuned. It helps us be here, connected, fully involved in this moment. Whole, wholly involved here. And I love seeing, oftentimes, ninety-nine percent of the time, I think, that when I see people who lie down in meditation here in the hall, I see that it's an intentional posture. There's care that's gone into it to find a posture that works.

That's intentional. That's like, "I'm determined. This is what I'm doing here. I'm meditating in this posture." So, the Buddha—there are thirteen exercises, attentional exercises, in this text, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. One whole exercise is knowing your posture, and that can be really good throughout the day.

What posture are you sitting in? What posture are you sitting in when you eat? What posture do you take when you're standing in line downstairs? What posture do you take if you take a nap? What posture do you take?

It's not like there should be any particular way. It's not like you have to look good for other people. But what posture does your body want to take? If you're attuned to your body, does your body give you instructions? "Oh, this would be good."

Or what posture does your body take if you ask the body to participate in the awareness practice? If you allow the body to be aware of itself in a very full way, does the body have its own ideas of how to stand, how to sit, how to lie down, how to walk? What feels most wholesome for a posture? What feels most supportive?

Rather than the posture being directed from the control tower, it's having the body be the teacher for itself. Asking the body, "What would be a supportive posture?" So all of us can be more present here, involved here. There are definitely some postures that are more like checking out, and there are other postures that are more like checking in. Like, "Oh, I'm going to be here."

Probably many of you have seen this kind of photograph, a lovely photograph of a little toddler who's sitting upright on the floor. Maybe there's no shirt on, so you see their back. The back is completely straight. It kind of feels like, "Oh, this is a posture that's awake. Wow, this is a back that's awake." They're, like, there.

So I like to think of *satipaṭṭhāna* as a gradual pointing to what you can gather, what you can wake up, what you can recruit to be more and more fully. Becoming attuned to yourself, to

what's here, you become more alive in yourself. This idea of being alive, the kind of vitality, is maybe closely related to the topic of what is wholesome and unwholesome.

How does it feel to be wholesome in this body? How can you carry yourself? How can you be? How can you recruit everything so there's this feeling of wholesomeness? Life is here that feels good.

Collapsing, giving up with a posture, has the opposite effect. Choosing an intentional posture and being a little attentive to posture throughout the day—not as a should, not as work, not as a taskmaster, not as something you can fail at—but rather something you can learn from, something that can support you, something that can help guide you, support you in being fully here, help you be more and more attuned, more and more becoming your own teacher, so you can guide yourself or find yourself how to be at peace, at ease, reassured.

So then there is the next exercise, number three. So this one is using, once again, one more part of the attentional apparatus. We have so many ways because we have to. Back in the plains of Africa, we had to use everything we could to stay alive and find our way. There were no manuals back then to know what to do.

You had to read the environment, read yourself. You had to read the animals. You had to read your community. In the present moment, we evolved to be very multifaceted, with a whole series of different attentional faculties to be able to take in our full environment.

Another one in this collection of attentional faculties is clear comprehension—to clearly understand. To clearly understand, something in you understands, I hope, when you wash your dishes in those great tubs, when it's clean enough. "Okay, now I can stop. I can put it in the other bin." Clear comprehension.

A clear comprehension which maybe didn't really involve any clear thinking about it. It was a nonverbal knowing. "Oh, it's clean enough now." But it was clear comprehension.

Or you notice that your teacup inside is stained, and you've heard that the sanitizer doesn't take out the stains. Clear comprehension: do I just abandon responsibility for this? Let someone else deal with it? I'll just put it in the tub? Clear comprehension: why don't I go over to one of the handwashing sinks and find a way to scrub it clean so it's not stained?

So there's some understanding—understanding the context we're in, understanding what's needed, understanding the situation—that can operate. That's part of this participation in the present moment. Clear comprehension about pain when you're sitting and meditating.

One of the surprises for me when I started to really learn mindfulness carefully was that there were different messages from different kinds of pain. Some pain had the message that this is injurious, this is dangerous. Clear comprehension: this is not a good idea, to injure myself this way.

It's not just being present for pain, and like all I'm allowed to do is be present for pain. "I'll note it. Pain, pain, pain. I hope they ring the bell. Pain, pain, pain. Perversion. Okay, I know I'm supposed to pay attention. Oh, I have a hindrance. Pain, hindrance. Pain. I wish they'd ring the bell."

It's to be attuned to the pain, to have the attention to the pain become beautiful. You're a craftsperson of attention. What's the kind of attention that you would bring to pain? So the attention is satisfying. The attention—you never regret that moment of mindfulness, that moment of attention.

How would you bring attention to pain? One way is you would pay attention with clear comprehension. What's really happening here? Is there any message here? Is there a message that this is dangerous? Is there the message, "No, this is okay. Just something stretching. It's not dangerous"?

This is part of our field of attention that's operating, and it's going to operate all the time anyway. But we can actually appreciate it. And so, this exercise three in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* has to do with clear comprehension, clear understanding, not just of what's there, but the context, situation, what's happening.

A practitioner who acts with clear comprehension when walking forward and returning; who acts with full comprehension, clear comprehension, when looking ahead and looking away; who acts in clear comprehension when flexing and extending their limbs; who acts in clear awareness, clear comprehension, when wearing one's clothes—and here it says it—when carrying one's robe and bowl, carrying one's plate and bowl of soup; who acts with clear comprehension when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts in full or clear comprehension when defecating and urinating; who acts with clear comprehension when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

What I'd like to propose is that all of you are operating with some kind of understanding all the time. It's maybe nonverbal. It's maybe operating subconsciously. How much salad you put on your plate when you eat, how much soup you put in your bowl, where you put your plate down to sit down—there are a number of things operating.

There's probably some understanding, some choice, some reasons why you do what you do. Can that reasoning, that clear understanding of what you're doing, be done consciously as a support to continually be here, be with this, be with this experience right now? Don't try to have clear comprehension about something which is not here and now. Have clear comprehension of what is here and now.

Can you do it in a way that's wholesome, that's beneficial, that supports this gathering, this gathering into a fullness of just this moment, just this? Allowing all these different pieces of who you are to kind of support this process. And to recognize it's probably going on anyway, and to settle back and say, "Oh, look at that. There's some kind of a knowing. I don't understand why, but there's some kind of clear knowing how much salad to take and put on my plate."

So one of the things I want to get across here, in going through all this, is that one of the ways that *satipaṭṭhāna*, this growth of mindfulness, works is through a continuity of practice throughout the day, all day long. You're kind of working to get into the groove, just staying in this ancestral homeland, staying here, so that you're present for this moment here, this time, with some kind of harmony, some kind of beauty, some kind of attunement, some kind of love, some kind of something that's wholesome.

Because one of the things we're doing here is retraining ourselves. One of the things we're doing here is to heal from some of the unfortunate ways our society has trained us to be anxious, to be afraid, trained us to think we have to prove ourselves, we have to do it right. There are all kinds of messages we've gotten that leave us stressed, bring us into an unwholesome world.

Maybe the world of the amygdala, where there's fear and anxiety, where there are stories that are constructed around self, which are built on unwholesome foundations. And there's such a strong groove in our mind sometimes for thinking certain ways, being obsessive about certain things, and repeating the same thing over and over again. "I'm bad. I'm wrong. That's dangerous. I'll be rejected. They won't want me anymore."

"I better walk down the steps just right. I hope no one's watching me walk across the hall, because there must be a right mindful way to walk across the hall, and everyone's watching. And, you know, I'd better look like I'm up to snuff here, because otherwise certainly the IRC police will come and get me."

I spent a whole day at Tassajara, when I was there, convinced that I had broken some cardinal sin rule there at the monastery. I was expecting any day now, any hour, any minute, for

someone to walk up to me at Tassajara. This was my first month. I was there as a new student. I didn't know how things worked yet, maybe the first month.

I was convinced someone was going to tell me, "Sorry, Gil, you have to go. You go," because I did this terrible thing. And I thought, "Oh, I'm in trouble." Then when I remember that day, I went back to sleep, and I said, "What happened?" No one kicked me out. Did they even notice what I did?

This horrible thing that I did, boy. I hope none of you do it here, boy. Oh boy. I overslept. I overslept, so I didn't get to the meditation hall on time.

So for my background, the way I was trained by my society, situations, my life growing up, that was enough. That was like—I was ready to kind of just see myself as a failure, as someone who was guilty, someone who wasn't worthy. Those were the grooves. That was the operating system that was cultivated close to perfection. Thank you.

You know, it had just been repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated over and over again. When we come into this practice, we're retraining ourselves by repeating over and over again something that feels good, something that's reassuring, something that's beautiful, something that is wholesome, something that we enjoy doing that feels good.

"Oh yeah, this is good. Being present in this way, being attentive in this way, showing up in this way. Ah, this is good." And there's no one who can teach you how to do that but yourself.

So you need to kind of track yourself and follow yourself and know yourself and feel yourself. Because this world of feeling, the world of knowing, is what's going to give you the information that you can adjust, tune the string of your lute, so you can make beautiful music. Retrain yourself so that your capacity for having all these attentional faculties operate in harmony, operate in a kind of, yeah, harmony.

Some people's attentional faculties and thinking and imagining don't support them to be fully here and fully alive. If you pay attention, you see they fragment us, they pull us apart, they undermine us. They give us all kinds of messages which are stressful, unwholesome, painful.

I suspect that each of you would be very attentive and loving and careful how you put the bandage on the knee of the little girl who's hurt. What if that's how you met yourself here on retreat? And what if you're here to cultivate and strengthen that by doing this beautiful thing all day long—a continuity all day of caring for what's here, attending to what's here, attending to your fear, attending to your anger.

Attending to your grief, attending to your joy, attending to your pleasures, but to do so in a wholesome way. So it's nice. It's good to pay attention as you breathe, as you attend to the postures you go into, and as you go about your daily life here at the retreat with consciously having clear understanding of what you're doing while you're doing it.

All for the purposes of bringing this present-moment attention into a harmony, into a coordination, into a retraining, into a healing, maybe even into a profound love for here and now, for you, for this being that you are. All through the medium of attention, learning all the different ways that we can attend carefully to now and here.

---KEYWORDS--- *satipaṭṭhāna*, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, four foundations of mindfulness, mindfulness of breathing, clear comprehension, wholesome, unwholesome, attentional faculties, intentionality, ancestral homeland ---END KEYWORDS