

Friday Dharma talk

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So, some of you, probably many of you, know that I like to distinguish the two kinds of practitioners: the beginners and the experienced beginners. And you get to self-identify. But one of the characteristics of an experienced beginner is always being willing to begin again, to begin over.

And there are ways of understanding our practice. There's a deepening that goes on. Mindfulness gets stronger. Concentration gets quieter and stiller, more focused. And it feels like there's a movement in a certain direction, onward leading.

I'm fond of the metaphor of a spiral. It's not like a line, a linear line, a straight line, but it's more like a spiral, perhaps. We come back to the same place. We come back to the beginning over and over again. And probably most people, most practitioners, spend a lot more time being beginners than anything else. Just starting over.

And if you're doing the *Satipaṭṭhāna* process in the order it's presented, you go back to sitting down, establishing posture, and establishing awareness in the present over and over again. Being aware of breathing, mindful breathing in, mindful breathing out, knowing when you're breathing in a long breath, knowing you're breathing in a long breath, breathing in, feeling the body, breathing out, relaxing the body. So, all those beginning steps. And maybe we spend more time as beginners than anything else.

And the second quality of an experienced beginner is to be disinclined to see anything as a problem. It's no problem being a beginner, starting again. Maybe by being a beginner, you see your attachments to being deep in practice. There's no problem being shallow or at the beginning. There's no problem in seeing that you're attached. In fact, that's the whole purpose—to see that you're attached.

It's not a crime to be attached. It's a success. Look at that. I saw it. I know it. I'm no longer tricked by it or no longer believe in it, but I'm still attached. It's good to see it. It's good to know it. That's the way forward. No problem. Just something else to be aware of.

And in the way that sometimes there is a simplification, a quieting, a concentrating in the practice, it's kind of like we're going through layers in the mind or the heart. Different layers will have different needs from us, different things in different ways, different things that we need to address or meet or discover. How it's not a problem. Look at that. Here I'm angry. Now I'm sad. Now I'm confused. Now it doesn't seem the practice isn't working anymore.

No problem. Now I get to know what it's like to have the practice not work. That's all. It was one way yesterday. Now it's this way today. It was one way last sitting. Now it's this way now. And in the process, the ideal is that you have a willingness to be with whatever it is to be practiced with. It's okay. This is what I'm being asked to practice with.

And I find it useful for myself, at least, that I kind of trust what's happening on retreat. I like to say to myself that *Dharma* knows better than I know what's supposed to happen, and I don't think there are any mistakes on retreats. So if it's like this now, okay, well, I guess that's what I have to practice with. There's something here that's important, something important that needs to be met and seen and held kindly and gently. Whatever it is, it's not a problem, but it's another opportunity to explore how to have a relaxed awareness of it, how to have a calm awareness.

This too. And then if it does happen that you have a really first-class problem, I mean a really good one, I mean you're not going to bother with a low-grade problem. You're going to do the best. You're going to be successful at something, after all. So you're getting a really good problem. So, okay, we'll call it a problem then.

But it's still an opportunity for you as a practitioner to explore: what is it like to have a relaxed awareness, having a problem? What's it like to have a calm awareness, spacious awareness? What's it like to know, "Oh, this is a problem"? If it's really a worthwhile problem to have, just say to yourself a hundred times, "It's a problem, it's a problem, it's a problem, it's a problem." I won't do all a hundred, but, you know, after a while, it's like, "Give me a break," or maybe you'll smile, or maybe you feel the problem.

You feel what is happening for you. What are the sensations? What's the feeling? And maybe that's something that needs something profound from you. It needs to be felt. It needs to be in that soaking. It needs to be somehow cared for in a gentle, nice way. Not to be fixed, not to be solved, but to be held.

So this path of mindfulness has a lot to do with how we're aware, and everything else follows from that. To be aware. And one of the things that comes from that, focusing on how we're aware, is we see there's an alternative to a lot of thinking. We see that we can do something else besides spin out in thoughts and ideas and stories. We see there's an alternative to interpreting. We have an alternative to even conceiving anything about it.

There's slowly a discovering of being simpler and simpler. This is what I talked about in yesterday's talk. This process of simplification, simplifying by orders of ten, maybe. So we have a concept of IRC. That's a big concept. Probably each of you has a different image, idea of what IRC is. There are as many IRCs as there are people here.

But then you come in, and the idea is just a meditation hall. And then there's the idea of just here on your seat. And there's the idea of just this body. And then there's not so much thinking about the body anymore, but just the sensations. And then this process of simplification goes further. At some point, it's almost like we aren't really attuned anymore to the sensations themselves, but rather to their comings and goings, how they change, appear, disappear, shift, and move.

And the salient thing we're aware of is that change, is the movement. It doesn't really matter that it's hot or cold or pain or pleasure. It doesn't really matter if the sensation has to do with the breathing or your little toe. The mind is so simple that it's not quite processing or thinking about it or taking it in in a way that you identify it as hot or cold or pressure or movement, but simply the changing nature of it, comings and goings.

And this emphasis, to get that simple, is repeated thirteen times in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. There are thirteen exercises of mindfulness, and at the end of each, they have something called the refrain, because it's the same that's repeated in each one. And there it says:

“One begins to observe the arising of experience. One observes the passing of experiences. One observes the arising and passing of them.”

And so it's like more and more simple, just this coming and going. And what's also significant here is that what is introduced is another new attentional faculty. And now the attentional faculty that's emphasized is observing, to watch. And that's different than sensing, and it's different than knowing, because now knowing is not that important. There is not that much conceiving to be done, and there are no ideas to overlay on the experience.

Our ability to recognize something, to know it, depends partly on memory. But the mind gets even simpler, and you don't need any memory to see things coming and going. That

just happens right in front of your eyes. And the sensing is not really salient anymore. This observing has to do with a way of settling back, very relaxed, and the mind's eye perceives without being in the experience, without being caught in it.

With sensing, you're more in it. With knowing, there's more cognition. And now that things have gotten really quiet, really still, just observe. Don't interfere with anything. Don't be involved with anything. Don't make anything of anything. But just observe.

I like to think of it a little bit like being here at IRC on a chair outside, and there's a light breeze blowing through the leaves in the trees. We settle back and just watch the flickering of light and the movements of the leaves. There's no orientation to study the leaves and try to guess, what size are they? Is the length of the leaves twice as long as the width of the leaves, or three times as long? And what are those leaves? And maybe they're serrated leaves. And I wonder how many little points around the edges of the leaf there are.

Just nothing like that goes on. No, it's just observing the flickering of light, the gentle movements of the leaves in the wind, and the eyes wander around the tree, taking it in. It's observing, not sensing. And it's not knowing particularly anything about the tree or the leaves, just kind of absorbed in the gentle movement of the leaves.

So yesterday, the exercise we ended with was the four elements, the four properties, and they have to do with sensations. And this occurs just before the next exercise, of course. But the next exercise is visualizing or reviewing or contemplating or imagining a decaying corpse, a decaying dead body of a person. And one of the things I really like about this juxtaposition is sensations with a dead body. When a person is dead, when you die, there'll be no more sensations. That's one of the things that stops. The nerves don't fire anymore. It doesn't register anywhere.

It's almost like that exercise on the corpse highlights how special it is to be alive and be living in the world of the senses, in the world of knowing, in the world of awareness. And that this is our time to be alive. It's a special thing to have all this miracle of knowing, miracle of mindfulness. And that we're being reminded here, now: feel, be with your living body. Be with your life. This is your time to be alive. Really be in it. Settle into it. Feel it. Sense it deeply. Trust it, here in the present moment.

And then this corpse exercise—it's meant to be a kind of imagination that the person does. It's kind of like a guided meditation, a guided meditation on the same process as before: things getting simpler and simpler and simpler, things dissolving in a sense. At first, when a body is just dead, you can see it's a person there. But if it's left out in the open, which apparently

they did in the ancient world, there were charnel grounds, it would slowly decay, slowly decompose, and at some point it would look like this:

“As if a practitioner were to see a corpse in a charnel ground that had been reduced just to a skeleton, without flesh or blood, held together by tendons.”

One connects this to this image that’s made, and one associates with one’s own body: “This body too has a nature like this; will become like this.”

So one day—but you probably won’t be left at a charnel ground. In addition, if a practitioner were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground, reduced to bones not held by tendons, scattered in all directions: here a hand bone, there a foot bone; here a shin bone, there a thigh bone; here a pelvis, there a spine; there a jaw bone, there a tooth. To this too, one considers one’s own body: “This body too has a nature like this. It will become like this.”

In addition, if a practitioner were to see a corpse cast aside in a charnel ground, reduced to whitened, shell-colored bones, so too one’s own body will be like this. And if a practitioner were to see a corpse cast aside on the charnel ground, reduced to year-old bones heaped up, to this one connects to oneself: “This body of mine too has a nature like this. Will become like this.”

And finally, as if a monastic were to see a corpse cast aside in a charnel ground, reduced to rotted bones, crumbling to dust, to this one connects to one’s own body: “This body too has a nature like this; will become like this.”

So there’s nine different steps like this, nine steps of decay, becoming simpler and simpler and simpler. In the beginning, you might actually recognize the person, have a name, and see characteristics of them. And slowly those things fall away as the body decays more and more. Then it’s no longer a whole body, but just pieces of bones, and the bones then eventually crumble away into dust.

So here we have this process of simplification again, but maybe in a little bit gruesome way. And it’s possible that was meant as a guided meditation. As the meditator was kind of visualizing these step by step, what they’re focusing on becomes simpler and simpler and simpler, until just dust. And there are so few concepts, so few ideas left that the mind has to visualize, conceive, construct, or imagine to just see a little bit of dust on the ground. The mind is getting stiller and quieter, more peaceful, no longer involved in conceiving, no more involved in imagining.

And so maybe the mind is more peaceful, more at ease. Here too, the practitioner is still alive, and what is it alive with? It's alive with consciousness, alive with the ability to be simple and clear and spacious and peaceful. Not busy, not actively creating and constructing ideas and stories. It takes some trust to allow for this process of simplification, to allow yourself just to be very, very simple, without adding anything.

That was a big surprise for me when I came to Burma to practice *vipassanā*. I discovered a lot of peace in my practice before going there. But what I discovered quickly when I got there, my sense of peace or acceptance, my sense of kind of just being present in a very nice way, was still kind of broad, kind of in the world a little bit closer to the world of ideas. And I saw, in my doing *vipassanā* practice, more in the micro-moments, there was a lot of non-acceptance, a lot of wanting, not wanting, aversion, desire. A lot of kind of conceiving and little stories, little ideas that were creeping in.

They were so quiet, almost like it was in the nonverbal mind operating. And I thought I was very accepting, just to be present in my breathing. And I said, "Nope, nope." If you look more carefully, I saw. So it was really great to see that, because then I can include that in the practice. I can allow myself to see it and hold it and feel it and be present for it. Not make it a problem, but make it, "Oh, this too can happen. Look at this."

And it's a world of difference to see clearly, to know clearly, to feel clearly, than it is to be participating in it, to be involved and contribute and react. So there's a process of simplification that is meant to be a natural process that you don't have to do. You're not making it happen. In this practice, all you do is keep showing up, be present for what is, being willing to be a beginner with whatever it is here. This is what I'm asked to be aware of now.

But, but, but, what about deep concentration? What about all the spacious awareness I had yesterday? But, but, I'm just messing myself up. I just kind of can't help myself but to have aversion to what's happening. How do I get back to where I was at? No problem.

All you're being asked to do is to recognize what is. Allow whatever that is to be itself. To see things as they are is one of the great hallmarks of Buddhist practice. To see things as they are. You don't have to see them as you wish they were. You're asked to see things as they are. You don't have to be deep and concentrated. You don't have to have great spacious awareness. A relaxed awareness of what is happening is what this practice is.

And if you want to kind of experiment, as I keep saying, experiment with how you're aware. Discover how you're aware. "Oh, mostly right now I'm aware of the sensations. No wonder I'm so reactive. The sensations are uncomfortable. Oh, cause and effect. Who would have

guessed?” This is what’s happening.

Mostly, what I know is that I’m aware through knowing. But it’s a kind of complicated knowing that I know it by. It’s not just simply that I know discomfort. I know discomfort as being a mistake I’m making. If I was just doing it right, I wouldn’t have it, and I have to figure out what I’m doing that I’m doing wrong. I mean, now we’re in this more and more complicated world of abstraction, and that’s okay. This is a world that’s abstracting. This is the way of reacting. Look at that. I’m in the knowing, and the knowing is building stories.

So over and over and over again, just being with what is, and that gives you the material. That gives you the stuff that you can soak in the *Dharma*. That gives you the stuff that you can give time to. “Oh, I can give lots of time. I can know this slowly, slow knowing.” There are some people who teach *vipassanā* kind of like fast food. There’s fast *vipassanā*, but we’re in the slow *vipassanā* school. Slowly know. So you can feel it and see it and make room for it.

You can soak it in awareness, in time. You can allow things to unfold on their own. There’s no hurry here. Hurry belongs to the world of stories. Yeah. Okay.