

Sunday Dharma talk

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When I was introduced to *vipassanā* practice, it was clearly—maybe not clear even—but required to do mental noting, and I did it for quite a while. One of the things I learned was how important it was to pay attention to how I did the mental noting, because two things would happen.

One was I saw that I brought along a lot of baggage extra to the noting. My feeling sorry for myself was in the tone of voice with which I was noting. My aversion was in the tone of voice, the energy with which I noted. My confusion was there somehow, and my hesitancy around noting a little bit. My enthusiasm for what was happening, like, “Oh, this is great! Wow!” was in the tone, the voice, the way I noted.

So, seeing that, I learned about myself. I learned about all the extra things that I added. I learned about my relationship to what was being known, what I was being mindful of. That was really important for me, really useful to see.

The other thing it did was allow me to adjust my notes—not what the notes were, but how I said them. Could I note them a little more calmly? Could I note them a little bit more—I don’t know if “committed” is the right word—but definitively or confidently? I often want to diminish something, since I’m like, “Oh, that’s kind of uncomfortable, kind of uncomfortable, a little uncomfortable, sort of,” you know, kind of that kind of way. Rather, no: “Uncomfortable,” just simple and straight.

Could I find a place in the mind where I could note without aversion, without fear? Without self-pity, could I even note from a place where it didn’t seem so much like I was the agent of noting? So it was really important to explore that. Then that spilled over into not just the noting, which I don’t do so much anymore, but to the knowing.

Noting is understood to be an emphatic way to know, so it's in the knowing family. But, so, to know. I saw the same things were operating in knowing. I could know something, but I wasn't just an innocent knower. I was leaning into things or pulling away from things, or had my aversion kind of in the knowing itself.

I saw the same thing with sensing. Some things were really delicious to sense, and I could see the sensing was kind of leaning into it. Sometimes it was being soothed, being comforted. Sometimes the sensing was something uncomfortable, and then my sensing would be pulling back, be hesitant. That was the most common one for me. I suppose you could be pushing away, too.

So, in this practice we're doing, it's not only important to know something—know your breathing, for example—or sense something, sense your feet as they walk. But it's possible to overemphasize that, especially in this tradition where, if you've listened and gone kind of deep into the teachings, the idea is that if you just see right into the middle of something, you'll penetrate its nature and you'll be happy ever after.

So, just, you know, there's something in that object, in that thing. If you just kind of cock your head and look at it just the right way, it will reveal itself in such a way that you're good forever. It's, "Wow! That's it. You did it." So there's a lot of, you know, looking, a lot of extra looking, looking for that thing that sometimes is called the insight, the big word.

But it's very important to start knowing how you know, to feel and sense how you're sensing. There are all kinds of things to discover. It's possible to discover a calm way to know, a peaceful way, a non-agitated way. In these ancient teachings of the Buddha, they put emphasis on a non-agitated mind. That is the mind that's really useful for having a liberating experience, but first they get non-agitated.

They also have language. They use the word "cool" a lot in the texts. The mind becomes cool, which maybe for English-speaking people, the English language doesn't have the same associations as "cool" has in the hot climate of India. In India, cool is like the best. In cold, damp England, probably warm is better.

But so, I know for me, I was a little bit put off by some of the language of having a cool mind. But if the contrast is an inflamed mind—the inflamed mind nowadays, there's a lot of emphasis on inflammation. Just eat enough walnuts, and everything will be good. But a cool mind, a non-inflamed mind.

And the same thing with *nibbāna*. I kind of don't like that. Literally, one of the meanings that many people turn to is "to extinguish," "extinguishment." Come to IRC and extinguish?

I don't know. People wouldn't come here.

But again, the metaphor is being used in relationship to flames. So: inflamed, burning, to put out the burning. The mind can burn. We can burn with anger, hatred. We can burn with desire and lust. We can burn with fear.

We can be agitated. We can be out of balance. There's a variety of language, of words in the *Pāli* texts, that talks about balance, a balanced mind. Sometimes the word *sama*, S-A-M-A, could be "balanced." It could also be "in harmony."

And that famous story of the monk who has trouble meditating: he goes to the Buddha. It turns out that before he was a monk, he played a lute. And the Buddha says to him:

"If the string of the lute is too tight, does it make a nice sound? No. If it's too loose, does it make a nice sound? No. But if it's just *sama*, if it's just balanced, just even or something, will it make a nice sound? Yes, then it makes a harmonious sound, and it becomes workable."

Part of what makes it harmonious or balanced and workable for a lute is that it works with the other strings; it's in harmony with the other strings. So we can have a mind that becomes harmonious, balanced.

Part of the advantage of beginning to have such things—a calmer mind, quieter mind, a stiller mind—is that we can see better when we're not that way. It stands out and highlights. One of the tricks of the mind is the way in which the mind can be agitated, can be out of balance, can be afraid, can be filled with desires and hatred. The way that these things operate, often they camouflage themselves. They camouflage the effect they have on the person who has them.

Sometimes it's because the object, the focus, is so much on the object of my hatred, the object of my desire, the objects of what I want and what I don't want, the thing that's right, the thing that should be different. So the constrictions, the tightness, the burning, the agitation, the losing harmony, losing our balance, is not seen because we're mesmerized by the force, the authority, the directionality, the strength, the energy of these forces inside of us.

What I want to emphasize here is that we don't see the effect they have on us. Part of what we can do in this practice is start knowing how we know. We can also know what's happening to us by these attitudes we have. We can know the effect it has on us when our knowing is hijacked, when our thinking mind is hijacked by things that make us agitated or constricted,

or things that make us afraid, or things that make us caught up in something, caught up in stories over and over again.

It's possible to feel that. One of the great advantages of being on retreat—it's one of the best places in the world to obsess. I mean, people who have no obsessions will find themselves thinking the same thing over and over and over again. Probably one or two of you have had that issue here, and I've had that in retreat.

Wisdom only arose when I physically started feeling tired from thinking the same thing over and over and over again, reviewing it, rehearsing it again and again. I said, "Wow, this is exhausting." I saw the harm it was doing. I saw how it was undermining me.

But it's possible to see that much more quickly than having to rethink and think and think. It's possible to see it right in the moment. Wow, some people say when they get caught up in their thoughts, things get dark. The world gets narrow and small. And it doesn't feel good.

That's wonderful feedback the system is giving you. "Oh, look, this isn't good. This is not healthy. This is undermining." And it's hard, again. The mind camouflages itself.

For people who don't have any higher-quality way of being peaceful or calm or settled, still, it's very hard to see because this is what life is: to be this way. And so much, this way is life. Sometimes the very idea of these thoughts that are so compulsive and so caught up in—of course, they're part of life because that's who I am. I am those thoughts. I am in those thoughts.

And so, you know, they're true. They're how things are, and everybody has to accommodate to my truth, my who I am. But to shift the understanding and start seeing the impact knowing desire and aversion has on us, that change begins changing the whole inner ecology. It helps bring things more into harmony, into balance, into kind of a subtleness.

So, to find a way to know that not only is not undermining us or debilitating, but a way to know that feels good, that is nourishing, supporting, and to start learning more and more about what knowing is, what sensing is. Maybe to even say it that way, the singular "what knowing is," suggests it's just one thing. Maybe it's better to ask what knowings are. Maybe there are many different ways to know.

That's one of the things I would like, hopefully, for some of you to begin seeing: there's the knowing that you do intentionally. "Okay, I'm supposed to know the inhale, and I know all too well that it's the belly expands, but I'm supposed to know it. So there it is, expanding. I did it, successful. Check that off. That was my to-do list. I'll get back to it in ten breaths, do it again."

You know, so maybe that's not fair to characterize it that way. But there's the intentional aspect of knowing what you choose to know, where you put your attention, so you know those things. But there's also the knowing which is not intentional, that's spontaneous. There's a knowing that is maybe nonverbal, or there's the verbal knowing which is not you doing it. It's not anybody else.

There's knowing which happens peacefully all the time, even if the part of the mind you identify the most with is agitated. There are other parts of the mind that are quietly knowing. All of you who are here in this room, and those of you online, maybe if you're not—unless you're outside—when it's time to leave the room, chances are you don't go searching around to see where the door is. You already know where it is, but the knowing is operating in your actions.

The knowing is right there, but it's there in a very quiet way. It doesn't insist on anything, but there is knowing: the door. Sometimes when we step over the door here, out of the meditation halls, I don't know about you, but sometimes I like to avoid that high door sill. Step over it, and sometimes it feels kind of nicer. I don't know why.

Sometimes I step over it. Sometimes I want to step on it. There's some kind of choice that goes on. I can see that I'm choosing, but I'm not choosing. I know there's this high door sill. I know, make a choice about what to do about it.

It doesn't seem to use any energy from a data center. It's just kind of quietly, peacefully. But there's a lot of this going on, a lot of it. To relax and quiet, and begin noticing all the knowings that are done in this peaceful, quiet way that you can't quite take credit for—it's just the mind doing its thing.

Or the sensing. There's a lot of sensing that goes on that we don't pay much attention to because it's not particularly uncomfortable. It's not what we're focused on. But something is registering it. Something is taking it in and maybe making a very simple evaluation about it.

I hear the car going by, and it's a relatively harmonious car sound. That's good. It's not alarming. I've heard car sounds out this road that were so alarming that I had to go out and help, since they crashed into the side of the wall over here.

So, there's some kind of quiet evaluating the sound: "Oh, it's good. Everything's good." But I wouldn't consciously know that I was doing that. There's a way of kind of settling back and beginning to become attuned to the different layers of knowing, different ways that we know, and to start becoming aware more deeply of ways in which we're uncomfortable and ways in

which we're comfortable.

This idea of comfort, pleasant and unpleasant, involves this process of simplification that I've talked about. As if we can simplify, and we no longer necessarily know what the sensations are. Like, "That's my hand vibrating." All we know is vibrating. We don't have to impute or add the idea, "hand vibrating."

I mean, sometimes we do this naturally. If it's a warm day, you just complain about being warm. Some of us just always say, "Warm." But in the practice, is your little toe warm? No, not there. What about your back rib cage? Can't quite say that's warm.

It turns out most of the warmth is in my front half of my body. Most of the warmth is in my lower arms, not my upper arm. What about the elbow? I can't seem to find any warmth there. The warmth is just, you know, the idea of a body: "I'm warm."

It's a very big generalization, and we can live in that generalization and have all kinds of associated meanings attached to it. "Boy, this heat is oppressing me, and this is a drag." And we live at that kind of generalization level. But, oh, let's look at this. Where's the warmth? Where's the hot?

Oh, look at that in that area. What happens if I feel it? Well, the area disappears. It's just warmth. Sensations are just the sensations. Some things are comfortable, and some things are uncomfortable.

One of the very important parts of *Dharma* practice, believe it or not—now you all go home when I say this—is to become finely attuned to what is comfortable and uncomfortable. In the way that we finely attune to what is wholesome and unwholesome, we ourselves become our own teacher because we really see the effect, the consequence that has on us, of certain ways of knowing, certain ways of sensing, certain attitudes, certain relationships we have with what's going on.

We say, "Oh, well, that's kind of uncomfortable to do it that way. That seems imbalanced. That causes an imbalance. That seems to be agitated." And there's another way that seems unagitated. That seems cooling, quieting. That seems sweet.

So it's possible to have this kind of simple evaluation of knowing itself. All that knowing that felt like work—no wonder people don't want to do *vipassanā* practice when knowing feels like work. Other times, knowing feels like play. Other times, knowing feels very sweet and caring. To know is to care. To care is to know.

Sometimes it feels like it's the most natural thing in the world to know. There's almost like a

desire to know because that's what the system wants to do, and it's nice to kind of go along with it, allow the system to know without pushing it or trying to figure out what it is. If you try too hard to figure out what you're supposed to know, it's a little uncomfortable. Right there's something to pay attention to. Finely attune to discomfort.

So, is there another way to do this? I don't know what's happening. So, how can I be with not knowing what's happening? How can I not know in a good way? I'm fond of, I think it's a line, half a line from a movie from the '60s: "Something is happening here."

Something's happening here, but I don't know what it is, and I don't need to know what the truth of the moment is. There's something. It's that simple. Oh, something. Maybe it'll show itself later.

That's not my responsibility, to go searching. I don't have to figure it out. I just figured it out perfectly, given the conditions of the moment: it's something.

One of my favorite mental notes that I used to use in noting, for me, was like the biggest note that can encompass everything. In certain circumstances, like this, it was like the note that was all-encompassing. That just helped me so much: "Chaos." Chaos.

As soon as I said "chaos," then there was some little bit of order, little bit of, you know, little bit of non-chaos in the middle of the chaos. At least I knew it was chaos. And then, "Oh, where is that chaos?" I must feel the chaos. Well, it's mostly swirling all over above the waist, my whole body above the waist.

Oh, okay, now it's a little bit closer. Yeah, but then where? Oh, it's mostly the chest. Oh, and just slowly, I get to know it better. But "chaos" was just such a wonderful note for me, to be okay with chaos, to not have to struggle with it, and just, "This is what it is."

So, to become finely attuned to what is comfortable and not comfortable is one of the subjects of knowing. At some point, that's one of the most important things as we settle more and more. We start saying, "Oh, this way of being is uncomfortable. This attitude, this activity of the mind, this way of knowing is uncomfortable." Now this one is more comfortable. This is a comfortable way.

And we kind of become our own teacher. Not to be busy, because as soon as you get busy, try to do it right—guess what? That's uncomfortable. "Okay, now I have a task. Now I know what to do. I have my marching orders. I'm supposed to look for the comfortable and uncomfortable, and let's, you know, steel myself up and really kind of do this right."

If you're really paying attention, finely attuned to comfort and discomfort, you'll notice right

away how uncomfortable that is. So this idea of mindfulness is meant to be self-protecting. As you really find finer and finer attunement to the effect, the impact of your behavior, your activities, your mind, your thoughts, you can see, get the message. “Oh, look at that! Something here is uncomfortable. Something here feels off. Something feels imbalanced.”

Something feels like it’s drawing me out, deflating me. Something here seems to be very, very difficult mood music in the movies that I’m providing myself. And what’s the alternative? The alternative that we’re trying to live with in this practice here is the simplicity of knowing, the simplicity of sensing, just this in the present moment.

Can we know calmly? Can we know chaos calmly? Can we know feeling imbalanced? Can the knowing of imbalance be a balanced knowing? Can we find a relaxed way to know?

Maybe not. That’s okay. But it makes a world of difference to know that it’s tense knowing, agitated knowing. “Oh, look at that. Okay. Well, I guess that’s how it is today. I’ll just know that. I’ll just go. I’ll just stay sensitive to that, that I’m doing it. Oh.”

Some of this attunement to comfort and discomfort is happening all the time, also kind of naturally. If you’re walking on maybe the paths here, and you’re paying attention to how the feet come down, maybe it’s uneven, maybe it’s some gravel, maybe there’s something uncomfortable, and you feel, “Okay, I better adjust this. This is uncomfortable. There’s a maybe—this is a little bit off. There’s an imbalance here. This needs some attention. This needs to shift.”

And you might not even think about it. You might be busy thinking about what was for lunch, because that’s, of course, very interesting. But in the background, your whole system is taking care of you and tracking, and just enough to know, “This is uncomfortable. This needs to change, shift.”

There’s that beautiful story from China of someone asking, “What is it like to be the embodiment of compassion? What is it like to be *Kuan Yin*?” And that teacher says, “It’s like adjusting the pillow at night in your bed.” I think it’s meant to be so unselfconscious. It just is a little bit uncomfortable, without any planning, putting it in your date book.

You don’t have to report to anyone first. Wake up your partner and say, “Hey, I’m gonna just change your—adjust your pillow.” The very simple, natural, almost unselfconscious way, almost not thinking about it. So, the response to comfort and discomfort, to see and watch what goes on in some deeper place.

This deeper place is something that I like to call the deep mind, as opposed to the surface mind. And part of this beginning to abide more and more in the present, to abide aware in

the present, is this deeper sensitivity that we're developing, a deeper, quieter capacity to know, and to know how we know, and to listen to the deeper knowing, to listen to the deeper sensing.

It is so that we can start taking in the messages, the understanding, of this deep mind, so that we make room for the deep mind to process, the deep intelligence to be present and active as we go through this. The intelligence that helps us find the freedom, that finds the balance, finds the medicine which reduces the inflammations of the mind. We have within us this amazing intelligence that we could never dream of, if the camouflage of agitation, the camouflage of preoccupation, convinces us that our preoccupied desires and fears and hatreds—that's where it's really at.

But to kind of step back and really start feeling more deeply here, the deeper mind, to see what the deeper mind, what kind of knowing arises from that. Some of the examples I gave for this spontaneous knowing that goes on, like knowing where the door is when you leave, that represents, that's a pointer to a way of knowing. If you can see some of this nonverbal knowing, this deeper knowing that operates all the time below the kind of ordinary conscious mind, the door is a small thing, but it's the same sensitivity.

Same attunement that's going to give you the option to kind of be attuned to this deeper, deep mind, and what's there. And this deep mind knows and recognizes where the *Dharma* is saying, "Come and look here." I mean, one of the qualities of the *Dharma* is that: "Come and look here." It invites inspection.

This deeper mind is what is able to be attuned or be sensitive. "Oh, here! Here is where the door is. Here is where the path is. There is the path that's onward leading. Here." That the conscious thinking mind could never figure out.

And finally, the knowing of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the sensing of *satipaṭṭhāna*, is the sensing and knowing of here and now. The *Dharma* is visible here and now. The *Dharma* is immediate, here and now. The *Dharma* is inviting inspection. Come, come here into your direct experience.

It's inviting inspection, and how you inspect, come see how you see, is so important. The *Dharma* is onward leading, and this *Dharma* that's here and now is for you to personally experience. Stay close. Stay close to here. Stay close to now.

Stay close to where present-moment knowing arises. Stay close to where present-moment sensing occurs. Stay close to where present-moment comfort and discomfort occurs.

And as I said this morning during the meditation, it's the same simple, non-reactive, non-manipulative, non-fixing awareness—just simple awareness—that we use for what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. And the amazing thing is that that awareness takes the fuel away from the unwholesome. And the unwholesome kind of will eventually wither away, disappear. That same way of knowing makes space and room and a kind of nutriment for the wholesome, which then we allow to grow. We allow it to fill us.

So, don't try too hard, because that's probably uncomfortable. And don't try too little, because probably that's uncomfortable too, in some weird kind of way. See if you can try harmoniously, maybe even beautifully. Oh.