

Monday Dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

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When my son was a very little baby, there was a day he was lying on a changing table on his back. He was so young that about the only thing he could actually do was flail his arms in some kind of uncoordinated way. I looked at those arms, those flailing fingers, and wondered, “How in the world is he ever going to get coordinated?” It seemed like that was a long way to go. How was that going to happen?

He was just kind of an uncoordinated mass of beingness, flesh there, lying there. Sure enough, slowly he became more coordinated, and he developed mastery over using his hands and fingers. Hand-to-eye coordination became very good, and he knew that something made him do it. I do not know how much he knew, but then we got a ping-pong table, so of course I was better at ping-pong for a very, very short time.

We played a little bit, and then he left. Or, he went up to his room to watch YouTube videos of professional ping-pong players. He watched for a while, saw how it is done, and he came down and slaughtered me. So he had very good visual intelligence. He could understand the movements, and he could translate them to his coordinated hands and fingers.

There were all these different parts that were uncoordinated and unharmonious when he was a little baby. Slowly, they came into harmony, came into coordination, and worked together. That is true for all of us. We kind of take it for granted, and sometimes we just lump everything into some generalization of me, without appreciating all the parts that operate as part of the whole but are also distinct.

Part of the value of mindfulness comes from beginning to recognize some of the different parts of who we are that maybe we have not seen yet or understood yet. Because of that, it allows for a whole different level of coordination, organization, and responsivity. Maybe we

can live in this world in a more skillful way. Even the distinction between knowing and feeling, knowing and sensing, is something some people never really give much thought to.

They just never thought about that they know what they know, or how they know what they know. There is just something happening, and they respond to it. There is no sense that the mind that knows and recognizes has an idea of what something is. It might not be 100 percent accurate. It might be that the mind constructs things.

Maybe it is a learned construction from the society around us. Because we do not see that the mind is making things up, constructing ideas and interpretations, what we are seeing—the object, the thing—and the interpretation become one and the same. They become inseparable. A place where that can be very painful for individuals is to have an interpretation of yourself and to have that interpretation be inseparable from the perception of yourself—the way you feel yourself or see yourself.

If the two are the same, then it is just one big glob of maybe uncoordinated suffering. But with this practice, we begin slowly seeing more clearly. That is one of the hallmarks of this practice. One of, if we may say it, the goals of this practice is to be able to see clearly, to understand clearly, to perceive clearly what is here, and to be able to make these appropriate distinctions between different parts of who we are and how they operate.

To be able to see a thought arise, to recognize it as a thought, to recognize it as an interpretation, or to recognize the application of meaning to it, to recognize the preferences operating in relationship to it, to recognize future-making in relationship to it—there are all these things that begin happening. It is possible to see them really clearly. I think the first time that this really made a big impact on me was doing this *Vipassanā* practice in Burma.

Most days, we would go into the little house of the abbot to hear a Dharma talk or to do practice discussion. You would go through the door. Just to the right, coming in the door, there was a little altar, and there were some Buddhas there. We would just walk in.

One day there was a new Buddha there, and I saw these discrete steps of my mind. I saw seeing Buddha, having pleasure seeing the Buddha, understanding that it was a beautifully carved wooden Buddha, and then seeing desire for it arise. Boom, boom, boom, boom. I had never seen that like that.

I think in the past those steps would have all been fused together. I would have turned on it, saw it, and I want it. But to see the conditionality, the steps leading up to the desire—the desire did not grab me by the nose and by the throat, or whatever it does. It was not pushing me strongly from behind to go get it.

I just thought, “Oh, just desire.” Because of the practice, I saw the desire arise, and it did not occur to me to do anything with the desire. I just thought, “Oh, that was fascinating to see all those steps.” I turned my head back, walked in, and then sat down with the abbot.

I am confident that there would have been a time in my life when I would not have seen those steps. I would not have seen that I had a choice around the desire. If I have a desire, then I should act on it. I should start planning and thinking: “Okay, do I buy it from the abbot? Do I beg for it? Do I steal it? What goes on here? What do I do?”

But no, just boom, boom, boom. That comes partly from seeing, teasing things apart, seeing things more clearly. This is how it is. So this is what I think is a very important principle that I have spoken about a couple of times: this ability to see clearly, or to know clearly, or to feel clearly, to be aware in a clear way.

That does not really need to do anything about what it knows. It just sees it for what it is. Then we can add a lot, because we have so many needs as human beings. We add all these adjectives to make it more understandable, relevant, or helpful.

Rather than just an awareness that just sees and nothing more, we might call it accepting awareness. Now it is comforting. Just being aware is not, but it is the same thing. Or kind awareness, non-reactive awareness, receptive awareness, open awareness.

There are many, many ways of describing it, but just the simplicity of clear presence, clear seeing. The things that need to be fed to continue, the things that depend on constructing, depend on the fire, the fuel of desire or hatred, that depend on the story-making mind to keep them going—those are not being fed. Those tend to fade away.

Those things that have a deeper source within us, that are not constructions, are not being fueled by greed and hatred, but rather are things that grow in the soil of our goodness, that grow in the soil of our Dharma nature—if we are just present for it, relaxed and aware of this deep soil, this deep ground, this deep source inside—some things grow. They do not fade away. They become stronger.

It is remarkable, the kind of language the Buddha uses for this growth. He uses—and this is, I mean, talk about a sacred place in the text to emphasize this—this is in the description of the *Eightfold Path*. In the discussion about the four right efforts, which have to do with wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, he talks about growing the wholesome. To the point that it becomes abundant, we become filled with it, and it comes to a kind of completion.

Those are powerful kinds of words. How does that happen? It happens by how we are aware, by the space we make for things that can grow. We do not give much space for the growth

of what is good in us if we are always preoccupied, always planning and remembering and fantasizing.

I have said this also: in one metaphor, we are crowding the airwaves. We are taking all the bandwidth. We are using all the RAM. There is no space for anything more to happen.

We have filled the room, filled the space with those thoughts, taking the air out of the system so nothing can grow and breathe. In one way or another, we want to clear the space, open up so the sun can shine, and provide breathing room for things. There is a beginning to appreciate seeing, “Oh, this way of operating the mind and thinking—yes, I can accept it. That is okay.”

But if I meet it not with just accepting it and letting it continue, but really see it clearly in this non-reactive, non-involved clarity of mind, then I can see clearly for what it is. This is a fantasy. This is believing that having the desire is important. This is an addiction to hatred, ill will, resentment.

We start seeing clearly, “Oh, this is how it is,” and then there is no need to make more stories. But that is what the story-making mind will do. “I cannot be a card-carrying Buddhist if I have stories of revenge. I must be a terrible Buddhist. I just will not tell anyone that I sat for an hour on retreat plotting my revenge.”

This is the story-making mind, constructing, making things up. But to see clearly, “This is the story-making mind. This is the meaning-making mind. This is the reactive mind”—the mind that sees, feels, knows something, and automatically there is a reaction. Wow, look at that. There is a reaction.

To just kind of see clearly—that is all we are asking you to do here—to see clearly and make room. But it also makes a difference what we see. There are some choices we make in this practice. For this, it makes a huge difference to begin seeing that there are these two different operating systems within us.

Being able to make distinctions, seeing these different parts, seeing the hand, seeing the eyes, so there can be hand-and-eye coordination. Seeing that not all thoughts are the same. Not all thoughts are story-making. Not all thoughts are constructions and imagination. Not all thoughts are reactive habits.

There are thoughts that are wise. There are thoughts that are Dharmic. There are thoughts that are compassionate, that are closer to reality, that are there to take care of ourselves and take care of the world. There is a generative place within that is very different from the reactive thinking mind.

To be able to see that difference, to see, “Oh, this is one way, this is another way,” then we can see that I should not have one policy. Not all thoughts should be let go of. Some thoughts are supporting your practice. You might not even think of them as thoughts, because the reactive thoughts, the discursive thoughts, are what we most commonly think thinking is.

But there are other very quiet thoughts. It could be that maybe the knee hurts. You sit here, and it occurs to you, “I seem to be resisting the pain. I think I seem to be having aversion to it. That is interesting.”

“What if, instead of holding myself back, I felt the pain? What if I felt it at the edges, just beyond, just outside the pain, just a little distance? Or what happens if I put myself in the middle of the pain? Just feel the pain inside the pain.”

“Which of those allows me to kind of be simple and clear, and just allows it to be there? I wonder if I need to look more carefully at my relationship to the pain. I seem to be tense. I seem to be angry. I wonder what that is about.”

“Maybe I should just hold the anger in my awareness, see that very clearly. Maybe that is what needs attention.” So there is kind of wondering. There are questions like, “What? Where should my attention go? What should I pay attention to now? What part of it?”

This is a natural part of mindfulness. It is not being busy. It can be done from the reactive mind: “Boy, if I just get that bazooka mindfulness and really blast it away and bore down into it with my drill of mindfulness, then it will just go away, and I will get all calm and peaceful, and I will be able to know the winning lottery numbers. It will be great.”

That is a complicated, reactive kind of mind relationship. But there is one that is wholesome and one that is not. One that feels pleasant and one that does not. One that feels supportive and one that does not. One that feels contracting and one that feels opening.

So, begin seeing that there are different ways of thinking. How do we support the practice? What do we do that helps us to be present, freer, more relaxed, more at ease, more concentrated, more just present in a loving way?

This distinction between reactive modes—the story-making mind that makes things up and makes up ideas about yourself and others and all that—and the mind that does not make things up but is really present for things as they are clearly seen and responds to what is clearly seen in wholesome ways, in beneficial ways, where the seeds of goodness can sprout in the soil that is deep inside, that has been tilled, worked, relaxed, and opened.

The first place where that clearly gets expressed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is in the second

foundation, on *vedanā*, sometimes called feeling, sometimes called feeling tone. There, there is a very clear distinction being made between those feeling tones that are skin deep and those feeling tones that are deeper than that. The way that is described in the text is feelings of the flesh and feelings not of the flesh.

But that does not quite work for an English audience to inspire them or get their bearings on it. I like to think of it as the feelings that are only skin deep, that have to do with ordinary sense experience we take in with the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the skin, and that which is not of the flesh, that which is deeper than the skin. It has to do with things that are deep, deeper feelings, deeper sensations within us that are not stimulated by outside sense contact but rather are part of the working of the inner intelligence of what is happening, the inner systems that are operating and moving around.

There are comfortable and uncomfortable. They say pleasant and unpleasant. The words said literally in Pāli are *sukha* and *dukkha*, which in other contexts would be happy and happiness and suffering. In other contexts, *dukkha* also means pain, painful, pleasant, and painful.

There are those that occur at the surface because the sense experiences are being stimulated, and those that happen more deeply inside of us. Just hearing that allows us to begin distinguishing something. “Oh, there is a significant distinction here. There is more going on than just sense pleasure.”

What am I feeling more deeply? Is there a deeper pleasure? Is there a deeper pain that I carry? Something that is not quite the same thing as particular senses being stimulated?

They are making this distinction in the *suttas*. Generally, most people understand the deeper one, not of the senses, not of the skin, deeper than that, to be more like the things that get awakened through the practice that are part of the practice. Occasionally, people have tried calling feelings not of the flesh spiritual feelings. So what are those?

They are not the ones that are not pleasant; they are painful. The primary representation of this that I have seen in the ancient texts is: if you really want to practice, if you have a strong desire to engage in Dharma practice, but for some reason you cannot. You just cannot seem to win the lottery at IRC. You just cannot seem to have time because you have to work or take care of family or do something.

But at some point, some people have this very strong feeling: “Yeah, the most important thing for me to do is to practice, or to be on this path to freedom, to liberation. Nothing else matters.” It is almost like a deep inner call. “Yes, this is where integrity is, or this is where

wholeness is.”

Anything else, there is a feeling that it is shortchanged, or it is not whole, or there is not this love. To not be able to practice, not to be able to follow through on the practice, is an unpleasant deep experience. It is an unpleasant sensation of this deep operating system, this deep Dharmic place inside. I think another one that is unpleasant is anything that violates our integrity—to lie, to steal.

It just kind of feels like something: “This is unpleasant.” That unpleasant is considered wholesome. It is a wholesome unpleasant. Because it is wholesome, if you really allow yourself to feel it and know it clearly, be present for this, that unpleasant might actually grow, because apparently you have not gotten the message yet.

So it has to kind of grow so you really, really know it. The primary representation of the pleasant, not of the flesh—the pleasant spiritual sensations we can have—that the tradition uses is **samādhi**. To be so fully unified, so fully integrated, coordinated, so that all of us are coordinated.

Some of us are like the newborn baby, where it has never occurred to us to train or coordinate or practice using our fingers to grab things and hold onto things and move the arms this way and that way, having some hand-and-eye coordination like a baby learns. We have never learned to do the equivalent in our own mind and our own inner life. We let our mind think whatever it wants, react in whatever way it does.

In modern words, the executive functioning—the overview of it all—has not really had a chance to grow and mature. **Samādhi** is the coordination, is learning how to coordinate so many different factors, to integrate different parts of who we are so that they come together and work together in harmony. This idea of our different faculties coming together to work in harmony produces a lot of pleasure. Dharmic pleasure.

This represents the wholesome side of this deep feeling center that we have. It is not story-making. It is not because we win the lottery or we get praised. That is all considered to be sense data coming in from the outside, and it is very conditioned by that and dependent on it.

But this is deeper. What is nice about these deeper wholesome sensations of pleasure and well-being that can come is that they have a certain kind of endurance. They sustain themselves for a while. They are kind of there, humming and smiling and glowing.

The Buddha never, as far as I know, says, “Now, quick, get quick, and look at the impermanence of that.” Everything is supposed to be seen as impermanent. That is an important

insight, but it is not exactly applied to everything. Some things, like the glow of joy sitting in *samādhī*, it might be a waste of time to look at as impermanent.

The right thing to do is to know it with this non-reactive mind, know it clearly, make space for it, and if it wants to grow, let it grow. Let it fill you. The classic instructions around *samādhī* are to take the pleasant sensations that come with it, use those as a marker that shows you, “Yes, this is good. It is working,” and let it suffuse your whole body, let it spread.

One of the reasons why learning to feel the body, feeling the whole body, the beginning of *Satipaṭṭhāna*, is so good is that it is preparing you to have more space in your body, more awareness space, so that the well-being has a place to grow into and fill you.

So, at this Venera Foundation, what is implicit in this is that we are beginning to allow ourselves to see more deeply the pleasure that comes from giving ourselves fully to the Dharma practice and cultivating some degree of *samādhī*, some degree of continuity. Some capacity of beginning to coordinate and unify your intention: “This is what I am doing.” Your knowing and your thoughts are now gathered to really be present for the process of meditation.

You are no longer thinking about something random that is not here and now. Your feeling, you are beginning to tune into and feel the sensations in your body. That seems to be there together with the mindfulness of breathing, the attention to the breathing. Is there anything sweet? Is there anything pleasant?

Is there anything that feels wholesome and good in how you are aware of the breathing, in how you experience the breathing? Some people get a little bit sidetracked here because they expect that the sensations of breathing themselves are supposed to be pleasant. They kind of become that way, but it is not exactly that they are pleasant in and of themselves.

Maybe what begins happening is that there are the sensations of breathing, and there is the knowing that you bring to it. Those are two different entities. Then there is what happens when they meet each other. It is the kind of idea that we have in society that there are three entities when there are two people together: there is you and me and the relationship between us.

There is you and the breathing and the relationship between them. Hopefully, that is a good relationship. You are supposed to get married. You are supposed to at least fall in love with each other. It is supposed to be a positive relationship.

But how is it? What is that relationship? What happens when you come together? This very question: What do you find between the sensations and the awareness, the knowing?

Can that meeting be gentle? Can that meeting be loving? Can that meeting be supportive? Can it be wholesome? If you are straining and boring down and trying hard, huffing and puffing, it just causes stress.

So how would you meet it? How do you come together with the sensations of breathing in your body so that you really meet it carefully, lovingly, wholesomely? Maybe you have had the occasion in your life to put your hand on someone's shoulder, or on their elbow, or to touch the top of their hand. Maybe as they are dying, if you have been with someone as they die.

How do you touch that lovingly, carefully? This is maybe the last touch this person will have in their life. I was very aware of this when I sat next to my mother as she was dying, holding her hand. I did not squeeze it hard.

Or to touch a child who is upset and scared, and just touch them sweetly, gently. To pet a cat. Usually, when you pet a cat, you do not do it with your fist. That does not convey what the cat wants.

I think the metaphor of how you would pet a cat—I like it, I love it—as a metaphor for how to be with your breathing. Every breath is a stroke. For me, it is the exhale. It is a stroke.

Somehow, the way awareness is, the contact with the exhale, is right. It is kind of the same pressure that you would use stroking a cat. Not too much, not too little. I do not think it is possible to please a cat if your stroking is stressed out. I think the cat would pick it up.

You have to be relaxed. So, to have this gentle touching, feeling that you are there, and to be there and appreciate the whole exhale as if it is the most important thing in the world, because that is part of the coordination. This is important. Yes, the intention is there.

The thoughts, the knowing, the sensations, the body are coming together there to feel it together. There is a kind of receptivity in the body itself for how the goodness of this stroking-the-cat is coming in. Eventually, over time, there is even like purring that goes on in the human being when there is **samādhi**. It is kind of like your body begins to smile.

There is a sense of well-being or joy or delight, a thrill. It just feels so nice. Some people say it is dopamine. I feel like it is a little bit reductionistic to say that, because it is just so marvelous.

It begins to glow and suffuse. Then the meaning-making mind, the story-making mind, and reactivity come into play. “This is great. I cannot wait until we break silence and I can tell people what a great meditator I am, and what great **samādhi** I have. They will probably

give me a medal.”

“This is so good, and I just need a little bit more of this *samādhi*, and I will really kind of get into it now because then everyone will like me. This is the ticket to social success.” Now we have entered into another operating system. We have jumped out of that deeper place of wholesomeness and into the thinking mind, the constructing mind.

To see that, to know that, to know that these two different areas work, to know the constructing mind, the story-making mind, as that, so you do not get tricked by it, so you do not get carried away by it. That is also the reactive mind. You are minding your own business. You are sitting there stroking the cat.

Your breathing is purring. It is all nice. Then some car goes by and honks its horn. “They are upsetting my *samādhi*. They disturb it. Do they not know that this is a retreat center and you are supposed to make it quiet for people in deep *samādhi*?”

“What do these people do here at IRC? They did not make sure that there was no honking. I am going to write a letter, and next time I come here, I am going to plan ahead and make sure that I bring a little sensory-deprivation tank with me, so we do not have to hear any sounds or any coughing in the hall.”

That is the reactive mind. The story-making mind is taking over. That is a different operating system. That is the unwholesome operating system, the unhelpful operating system. You do not have to do anything about it except see it for what it is.

Look at that, and do not be tricked by it, do not get carried into it and do more and more of it. Look at that. What is amazing about the story-making mind is that even wholesome thoughts that conventionally are just a good thing can be stressful. All this compassion wells up, or you are here and want to apply it to the world, and you have this wonderful idea of a really new, efficient way of having soup kitchens, how you are going to make a franchise and chain and spread them across the country.

What a great expression of compassion. But as you are building this whole business model in your mind of the soup-kitchen franchise, you get exhausted. It is exhausting. It is stressful. It is kind of contracted and painful.

It was wholesome originally to feed the hungry, but the wholesome thing is not being done in a wholesome way. So we are beginning to distinguish all these different things. We are distinguishing between knowing and feeling tension and relaxing. We are distinguishing between intention and clear understanding, clear comprehension.

We are distinguishing between how we can hold things and be with them. We can let things soak. We can let things kind of sit there and grow. We can start seeing that there are times when it is not necessary to be thinking about what things are. It is enough to sense them as the elements, those four properties, and the mind gets very quiet.

As we get into this very simple area, one of the things we start seeing is that things are pleasant and unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. That is a very significant thing to notice because it helps us see the reactive mind operating. “It is pleasant, so I want it. It is unpleasant, so I do not want it.” Look, look. There it is.

You see those two steps? Wow, that was pretty clear. Maybe I do not have to take it one step further. We can start distinguishing between the pleasant and unpleasant that are part of a reactive world, and what is part of a deeper, responsive world. Something that feels more like it grows from the inside out, versus something that seems to be triggered from the outside in.

Oddly enough, the tradition treats the sense door of the mind that knows what is going on in the mind as something that too can be kind of outside of the system. If I am thinking about soup-kitchen franchises and how I am going to be written up in *The New York Times* for how compassionate I am, there is a lot of conceit there. That is actually skin deep only, but just in the brain. That is not really deep.

The deeper part, that which is not of the flesh, that which is deeper inside—the thoughts, as I like to point out now, the Buddha talks about that as coming from the *yoni*, from the womb, from the deep inside. To know that there are these two different sources for thoughts, different sources for what is pleasant and unpleasant, starts helping us to see more clearly what is here.

The more clearly we make these distinctions, it is not that we are becoming caught in the labels. Rather, it is the opposite. The more we can see the distinctions of how all these different faculties and things work, the more they can come together and coordinate and work in harmony. They cannot do that very well if we do not see it clearly.

So the quest to see clearly, to be quiet, to be here, is such a noble one, such a great thing. It allows something very deep within to begin bubbling up, surface, come up, grow, integrate, unify. A lot of this that I am talking about today can be discovered and seen just in the working of mindfulness of breathing.

Staying close to mindfulness of breathing, that is a wonderful place to bring this unification, this coordination. Maybe right there in your breathing, in the relationship between you and

the breathing, the mindfulness and the breathing, attention and the breathing, you start slowly beginning to discern the deep mind, the deep feelings, the deep source where things grow.

You will be able to see better and better the shallow source, the shallow mind, what is only skin deep, what is part of the reactive mind. Whatever you are seeing, just let it be. Just see it clearly, and give some priority, some intentionality, some love and dedication to gathering around the breathing.

Everything you need to see and learn is to be discovered there, entering the *samādhi* of breathing. Maybe some of what I talked about today will support you in exploring the wonderful, fertile depth of the Dharma within you. Thank you.