

## Tuesday Dharma talk

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In the teachings of the Buddha, he gives examples of how he used the deep mind to guide him toward freedom, and he did it by asking simple questions. This idea that, deep inside, there are certain thoughts that are helpful—maybe thoughts that you don't have to plan or figure out—but thoughts that come from a different source than what we usually identify as me, myself, and mine, which is usually the reactive mind, the mind that fabricates, constructs, where there's the self, wills, wants things.

What I find, what I want to mention now, is when the Buddha asked himself these most profound questions, having to do with suffering, his own suffering, they were not what questions. He didn't ask, “What is this suffering? What does it come from? What do I do? What does it mean? What does it say about me?” But his questions were, surprisingly maybe, questions about where. Where is this occurring? Where is the suffering occurring?

It's interesting that, in asking that question, it does direct one to a place, to a location, maybe in oneself. It's a question that kind of calls on not figuring something out, but to look. Where is this fear that I have? Where is it? That's a very different question than, “What should I do with this big, monstrous fear that fills the universe and is truer than anything else that I know at the moment?”

Where is the fear? Well, I just told you: the whole universe. Yes, not my universe. I have fear, but we must be living in different universes. Where is it? Well, you know, mostly it's in my heart, my belly, and now we're coming closer to something here, to where it's actually close to where it's arising and what's triggering it.

Weird, and he didn't answer it by a location specifically, but it's weird. It's arising where there's craving. Where's the craving arising? It's arising where there's desires. Where are desires arising? Where there are sensations of pleasant and unpleasant.

So this deep questioning brings us into our experience more fully, to experience it, to see it, to know it, not to figure it out. In this process of simplification that this practice involves, at some point we discover that there's such an important role that the simplest ways in which things are either pleasant or unpleasant is a condition for a reaction or a response. The reaction is one that happens automatically out of habit, based on habits and conditioning and emotional triggers that exist within us. But when there's not a reaction that's automatic, there's space to know and feel the pleasant and unpleasant. There's a little bit of time for something deeper to respond.

It's fascinating to watch. A simple reaction to pleasure is to want more, to desire. With the simple feeling of discomfort, right there with it comes aversion, maybe hostility, a pushing away. And right there, to be able to be there, in this location, this place, where we can see that there is something pleasant or unpleasant, and to see that there's a reaction—a contraction, a tightening, a reaching for, a pulling back—a reaction that then might come with a story, an idea, an interpretation that also seems to come automatically.

It can be humbling sometimes to see how much of this is automatic, how much this reactivity seems to be just operating on its own. But then the practice provides an invaluable way of meeting this, being with it, and that is to see it clearly, to know. Look at that. There's a reaction. There's pleasant and unpleasant. There's a reaction.

There is pleasant and unpleasant, and there's the inclination to be reactive. What inclination to be reactive? Might there be a choice? Might—what? But I thought, you know, I get a free ticket. But Buddhism seems to tell me that I'm not guilty. I can just allow my reactions. They're not me, so just let them be what they are. I'll have a good time.

But this idea that, wait a minute, there's an inclination toward a reaction. There's a movement. And what do you lose in the reactivity? What do you lose when you contract or get angry or resentful? Is it for your welfare and benefit to live in the world of reactivity? Is there a better way?

One way is to see it clearly and leave it alone. To not participate, but to see it. And as you know, I love the word respect for *Vipassanā* students because it has the word “see” in it. To see again, respect. So everything is respected, but to say no to someone simply means we're saying no to participating. We're saying no to adding anything to it, no to that part that wants to continue. Let's just leave it alone.

But then there's also the response. It's possible to have pleasant and unpleasant, and have wise responses to understand something profound that's going on. Maybe you're uncomfort-

able because you can look down the table at the dining room and see that there's not going to be enough lemon cake for you. And lemon cake's your favorite, and you know deep inside that more delicious than lemon cake is freedom—freedom from clinging, freedom from reacting. How sweet to say, “No, thank you,” to being concerned about there being no lemon cake for you. It's okay.

There's kind of wisdom. Some wisdom comes into play. You sit in meditation, and the breath seems to be sweet. There seems to be a pleasure emanating from being centered on the breathing, and certainly there can be a reaction to it that's automatic and involves clinging. But there can also be a whole different source of responding to it from our wisdom, from the deep mind.

No need to be afraid of that kind of meditative pleasure. No need to cling to it. But it can be helpful, useful, to say yes to it. This is good, and this is a *Dhamma* pleasure that it's good to be available for, to allow for. So it's almost as if there are two different operating systems: the ones that are reactive and the ones that come from some deeper wisdom understanding. They have different responses to the same stimuli.

Sometimes one says, “Yes, give me more of that.” The other one says gently, “No, thank you.” The reactive one resists and says no, pushes away. The wise one says, “Where is this discomfort? Let's neither push it away nor hold on to it.” Or there's a desire for something unhealthy, and the wise one says no, and the reactive one is impatient to say yes.

So when we start coming down to this simple place of pleasure and pleasant and unpleasant, part of the value of this is that we're moving away from the complicated stories. We're moving away from the complicated ideas of what things are, and we're coming closer to the simplicity of this moment here now, just this. Even in this simple breath, looking at the big stories and interpretations and categories, and what's happening in its complicated forms, just this: to be attuned, to feel the simple pleasure and displeasure, comfort and discomfort, from this quiet, deep place.

We can start sensing and feeling what seems like a *dhammic* pleasure, what seems like a *dhammic* discomfort. We can kind of begin sensing what is a reactive response, where that contains within it some kind of attachment, some kind of clinging to greed, to hatred, to delusion. And here, in the *Second Foundation of Mindfulness*, where the instructions are about knowing pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, the instruction ends with knowing the deep pleasures, the deep discomforts, the deep feelings that are related to this whole other operating system, related to a whole other processing going on here than the reactive one. And it's so useful to start seeing that operating, and to be wise with it.

Not a few people come to Buddhist meditation and don't realize that you're allowed to feel pleasure, *dhammic* pleasure. Somehow or other, when I did Zen practice, I got in that message from Zen that you weren't really supposed to feel joy when you meditate. So the solution is not to tell the Zen teacher. But in this early Buddhist tradition, part of the journey of practice is to recognize the *dhammic* pleasures that come from the practice and have an appropriate response for it—a supportive response.

It's certainly possible for the reactive mind to take over. Not a few people have had *dhammic* pleasure and have had a lot of clinging: clinging to have it again, clinging, trying to engineer it. Deeper, even, than that kind of simple clinging is the clinging to the kind of person, being the person who has meditative joy. Because if you could be that kind of person, then you'll be the most best meditator on your block. You'll win the block party, and life will be great.

There's some kind of conceit that we're attached to, that's somehow tied up in meditating. But there are healthy ways of responding: to appreciate that this is part of the path, that this maybe shows us we're very sensitive and quiet. If we hold ourselves still in a certain beautiful, quiet way, we can feel the *Dhamma* pleasure, feel the meditative pleasure, and say, “This is good. This is onward-leading.” This kind of is inviting attention. This is almost saying, like, “Come here, come here, be with me. This is a good, healthy place to be.”

A wonderful mental note and attitude to *dhammic* pleasure is the note, “Yes, yes, yes to this,” where a yes kind of is an opening, like, “Yes, I'm here to receive it. Yes, I'm here to allow it. Yes, I'm here to be available.” Where is the pleasure? Not what is it, not what you do, but where is it? Where's the heart of it?

Feel the pleasure in such a way that you continue with maybe your focus on the breathing, but you start to feel there's kind of a feedback loop. The more you're kind of absorbed, connected to maybe breathing, the object of attention, the more you're petting the cat, the more the cat purrs, the more the pleasure, the well-being, grows and gets stronger. There is a tradition that sees that, with really going deeply into the *First Foundation of Mindfulness*, mindfulness of the body, what follows is starting to develop deep absorption. And that's why the discussion moves to talking about *vedanā*, so that we can learn to recognize this deep pleasure and be supportive of it, and so let it grow.

And so there are these things called *jhānas*, deep absorptions. One of the things I find most interesting, especially in my role as a teacher talking to lots of people, is not specifically what is and what isn't a *jhāna*, but something that's much more fascinating that can happen at different levels of concentration, different levels of intimacy with your experience. Kind of cruising, gliding along, cruising with your experience, absorbed in it. And that is that there

tends to be a pattern by which things unfold.

The way that it's classically described is that there's a certain pleasure, certain sense of well-being or joy, delight, that first begins as we start getting kind of really in the present, really kind of cruising with just here, riding the breath, being with this present moment. The mind is not wandering off easily. It just feels like it's easy to kind of stay and glide, cruise. It's easy to kind of be, be with your wings, be carried on the updraft.

And there's this pleasure of no longer being caught up in reactivity. Wow. No longer all those thoughts, all those plans, all those ideas, all the reviewing the past, all the resentments—all of them have gotten quiet. And now, somehow, the mind is free of those. The classic language is, it has become secluded. And what a relief.

There's a pleasure in that. There's a delight in that. That's not just an evaluation in the mind, but it's like something resonates. Something recognizes the goodness of that in the body. Ah, yes. It's kind of like the heart smiles at this. The deep mind smiles, or the whole body smiles.

Wow, this is good. This is healthy. This is a relief. And then dipping further in, just kind of giving ourselves over more to this world of *dharmic* pleasure, the world of being really present for something like the breathing—not just present for the simple raw experience of breathing, but to be present for the sweetness, the pleasure, the beauty, the joy, the well-being that somehow is integral or intimate with, or permeates, the whole experience of breathing and being with the breath.

Breathing and sensing the breathing, being with the breath, and knowing, kind of being carried on the updraft. It's the combined working of all this together. Things have gathered. You're gathering together around the breathing, and it's more than just the sensations of breathing. Now there are sensations of goodness, sensations of pleasure, sensations of well-being that seem to emanate from being absorbed, from being intimately connected to the breath.

This is where, especially, you can feel that there's a feedback loop of, you know, petting the cat and the cat purrs more. And the heart smiles more. It's not uncommon for this to be people's smile muscles, muscles on their face, tightening up. At first, it feels like this is fantastic. What a happy event. I'm so happy. Lucky me, I get to smile.

And then eventually, this is a lot of work for my face. This is kind of tiring. Maybe I don't need to smile so much. Maybe this can relax, and maybe you allow it to relax. And this represents how some of this *dharmic* pleasure that comes, that's quite nice, with some degree of con-

centration, at some point can feel like it's a little bit too much. There can be some intuition that there's something else, something on the other side of this. There's something that's sweeter, calmer—a calmer happiness, a calmer contentment, a calmer sense of ease.

And sometimes the whole—you don't have to want to want it. Sometimes the whole system kind of feels all this. The more we can feel, take in the experience—and this is why the word absorption is so useful—because if you can place yourself in the middle of it and allow yourself to feel and sense as much of what's happening in a concentrated state as possible, then that's where it allows all these different faculties we have within, attentional faculties, to kind of organize, guide, coordinate. And sometimes the process just rolls along on its own, and we just stay out of the way.

And so the smiling kind of joy gives way to a deep, contented happiness, a quiet, sweet happiness. And then that kind of can morph into a peace, into equanimity, that's quieter, deeper, simpler. Things just keep getting simpler and simpler. After the contented happiness, there's the peace that follows, that equanimity that follows. It just seems like everything's gotten clear and simple.

So that's a kind of very approximate, meant-to-be-a-little-bit-vague idea that there is a process of change that we can be involved in, and it doesn't have to be. That can happen at different levels of concentration. You don't have to be in what's called *jhāna* for this process to work. It can be much, you know, not as deep. But it doesn't matter whether you're deep or not so deep.

What matters is that you're just present for your experience, intimately, fully. See, you say yes. This is *dharmic* pleasure. This is good. Let me say yes. Just be available. Let myself, let yourself, feel it fully.

Stay with the absorption. Stay with the practice, because, as I said, the whole system within us is going to start reorganizing itself with this new way of being. For some people, it's very powerful to have this happen, because it's a reconditioning of their fear. It's a reconditioning of their hurt. It's a reconditioning of their hatred, that place that hates.

All these things begin to relax and to heal, and to re-heal means rejoining the whole, not being pulled apart, not being isolated in its own little intense world. But things are starting to come together. And so this yes of absorption, yes to this, there's a kind of a yes to welcoming everything in. Yes, it all belongs. It all has a place. Nothing has to be kept out. Yes.

So part of the reason to say this, to give this talk, is because your ordinary mind might have very strong preferences for stories: war stories, romantic stories, stories of danger, stories of

hurt, stories of me, myself, and mine. All these things seem so important and so central to be able to find yourself, make ourselves be safe in this world, successful in this world, justified to be alive. And so we tend to kind of keep spinning and have no orientation toward a deeper sensitivity to what's really good that's going on here, that's underneath all that. And it's easy to miss.

There's already some peace here. There's already some sense of well-being here. There's already, underneath all the thoughts and all the reactions, all the difficult emotions—yes, they're there—but underneath them all, there might already be a place that's quiet and peaceful. There might already be a way in which something deep inside is beginning to heal and come together and help you say yes. And it might be very shy. It might even be a little bit afraid to come out because that makes you maybe vulnerable.

It's better to live in a shell. We live in all the stories, and we can't feel. We don't feel what's this deep place. But when we get to this *Second Foundation of Mindfulness*, where the Buddha specifies the difference between sensations of the skin, skin-deep, and those that are deeper than that, I believe it's an invitation for all of us to invite in the deeper sensations. The deeper sensations that are connected to breathing.

Some of the sensations of breathing might feel more like skin-deep, but there might be what's deeper. What's sweeter? Where is wisdom in you? And there might be more well-being in you, more available to you, than you have availed yourself of because of the strong identification with that reactive mind and the fabricating mind.

But giving yourself the benefit of the doubt that if you can begin opening, allowing these deeper pleasures, deeper well-being, it's actually good for all of who you are. You're not abandoning any part of yourself. You're not losing any part of yourself. You're creating conditions where everything is welcomed in to work together, to heal together, come whole. But all of it at its own time.

Some of these *dhammic* pleasures, simple *dhammic* pleasures, begin showing themselves in the relaxation of your muscles, softening of the belly. Right there, there can be a good feeling: no longer being tight. A softening of the shoulders, a relaxing, a calming of your knowing, a calming of your sensing, how you sense, a relaxing of the tension in the thinking mind, even if it's only partial and brief.

Even if attention comes right back, in the moment where you were able to soften a little bit, to appreciate any pleasure that comes with it, allowing the deeper pleasures to be the pleasures that lead to your freedom, and even help show you the way to being free—free of reactivity,

free of clinging and craving and grasping.

Thank you.