

Wednesday Dharma talk

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When I stepped out of the house just now to walk over here, it did feel like I was stepping into a furnace. I don't know what the temperature is here at this location, but it's at least in the mid-nineties. I know that just a few miles away in Scotts Valley, it's over a hundred degrees. So it's hot.

I hope that you're all drinking a lot, drinking extra. There is also a way of using heat as a support for immersing ourselves in our direct experience.

When I was in Japan studying Zen, there was one Zen master who was fond of asking questions of the students and then rating your answer: "No, twenty percent." The best part I saw a little bit when I was with him. He liked to ask the question something like, "What do you do when it's hot?"

I think you know the answer that gets up there in approval ratings was something like, "When it's hot, just be hot." So this idea of being immersed in whatever is happening is part of Zen training. Whatever you're doing, if you're sweeping, immerse yourself in the sweeping. Sometimes they use the language of becoming the sweeping, but really immerse yourself in this activity.

Don't be divided. Don't be multitasking. In this practice that we're doing, it's possible to immerse yourself in it fully.

The analogy that I like is that of an immersive language program, where you go to a foreign country and live with a family that only speaks the local language. You just immerse yourself in the language, the culture, the schooling, and everything is just total immersion. In that way, you can learn quickly and differently and fully, and learn context for the language as well.

So, immerse yourself in the language. Immerse yourself in the culture. Full immersion. That's one way of practicing on retreat.

Think of it as full immersion. You've come to live with a family, and you're learning the culture, learning the language, learning the way to be. Immerse yourself in the *Dharma*. Immerse yourself in this practice.

As it gets closer in, immerse yourself in your sensations. Immerse yourself in your direct experience here. I'm very fond of the way this whole *Satipaṭṭhāna* begins.

It does say: begin by knowing that you're breathing in. Know some of the characteristics, the qualities, of your breathing: long and short. That's a little bit long and short because the movement of breathing, as we get more and more immersed and settled in breathing, tends to get shorter and shorter, subtler, quieter.

Breathing in, one experiences the whole body. Breathing out, one experiences the whole body.

So here, too, is this idea of immersion. Immerse yourself in the whole body.

Then, as we get into this second foundation with *vedanā*, here too the idea is not to keep feelings at a distance and just know them. "That's pleasant. That's unpleasant. I did my job. What's next?" Rather, immerse yourself in this world of sensations.

As the sensations get simpler, immerse yourself in the goodness of those sensations—the dhammic sensations that come. They're not always there, for sure. But even so, don't hold sensations at a distance. Kind of dip into them, like you're dipping into a refreshing lake.

Part of the idea of being attuned to these deeper sensations—the sensations not of the flesh, sensations that are the dhammic sensations—is that these are the wholesome sensations that get born from the sincerity of your *Dhamma* practice. They're born from immersing yourself in the practice calmly, with relaxation, with the wisdom to recognize what is wholesome and not wholesome. See the difference when doing it with stress and without stress.

Have the deep sensitivity to see how to stay present here and now in an easeful way. Of course, we're going to wander off in thought. Of course, we're going to get distracted. What is the wholesome way to respond to that? What is the reactive way? What is the unwholesome way?

We're learning this immersive experience in order to recognize how we can respond to whatever is happening from a place of wholesomeness, a place of goodness, a way of responding that feels nurturing and supportive. Maybe because of our sincerity.

One of the primary reference points for these wholesome dhammic sensations, not of the flesh, are these wonderfully happy sensations, good sensations, that arise from being immersed in the practice. I'm emphasizing this word "immersed" because one of the modern translators of the suttas, Bhante Sujato, translates the word *samādhī* as immersion.

In different eras, I have different preferences for how to translate *samādhī*. I still like unification, but immersion is, at least for me, very evocative. It has such a richness to it, such fullness to it.

Unification means I gather together. Immersion means there's something else going on here that I'm immersed in. It's almost like we have permission to let go into this wider field of sensations that are maybe not so personal.

Maybe in some ways, it doesn't make any sense to take them as my sensations. This is me. This is the practice: to be immersed in the practice here and now.

What I'd like to do today, if you're fine with going along with this—you could ignore it—is use one of the attentional faculties. All these attentional faculties that we have, that we're gathering together to help us really enter the present moment in a full way, include our imagination.

Believe it or not, most of you know how your imagination takes you away, and you're pretty frustrated that your imagination is so good. But the Buddha also tapped into our powers of imagination to give us a visceral feeling for what this practice of immersion is like. He said that some people understand better through an image, through a metaphor, and can kind of imagine it, or kind of know what it feels like.

You're reminded about something. Rather than getting a technical definition, which then you have to figure out how to apply, if you can imagine in yourself, in your body, a felt sense of what this is like, now you're getting close to the territory. Oh, it has to do with this. It has to do with something intimate, close in.

It's not a textbook instruction manual. It's a mirror to feel something in ourselves, so that we can immerse ourselves in it.

So I'd like to read—maybe I'll do it more than once; we'll see—some of the things that the Buddha said about this immersion and what he said about *jhāna*. One of the first things I want to read is that, for each of the *jhānas*, each of these different phases of entering into our experience more and more deeply, he says this immersion is called the happiness of renunciation, the happiness of separation. It is being separated from our hindrances and our greed, hate, and delusion. The happiness of peace. The happiness of awakening.

I say of this kind of happiness that it should be practiced, that it should be cultivated, that it should be frequently done, that it should not be feared.

You don't have to be afraid of this. There, he calls these *jhānas* the happiness of awakening. They're quite significant. They give a foretaste of a deep letting go.

Because it's a foretaste of awakening, it's one of the guiding principles for understanding and practicing in these states. A lot of it comes from non-clinging. The first instructions I ever got in *jhāna*, when I first went to Thailand, a monk told me, "It's only about letting go. That's all it takes. Just let go, let go, let go."

I don't know if I agree with it, but it was kind of a nice first instruction. It made an impression. But the happiness of awakening is the happiness of not clinging to anything.

So the idea is: don't cling to the states. Don't cling to the practice. But immerse yourself in an open-handed way. Don't strain. Don't push.

If you dip yourself into a cool, refreshing lake on a hot day, you can do that without any clinging. It can be done by just lowering yourself into the water to be refreshed.

Then he describes this wonderful little story of how he first discovered these states. He was supposed to have been a child. Some people say he was only six years old, but we don't know how old he was.

He was reflecting back while he was still looking for his path to awakening. He tried different things. It didn't work. He had reached all the options that were available for him in India at that time.

So he had to fall back on his own reflection and wondering: What's the way? How do I find my way?

I understood that when my father was working, plowing the fields, and I was sitting in the cool shade of the rose-apple tree, separated from sensual desire, separated from unwholesome states, with the joy and happiness born of this separation, I entered and dwelt—I immersed and abided—in the first *jhāna*.

And then I had this question. I wondered. I had this thought: Is this really the path to awakening?

From having this reflection came this knowing: Yes, this is the path to awakening.

So here, this idea of deep letting go, of deeply giving ourselves into this deep sensation, this deep pool of our inner life. You can't be awakened by holding yourself apart from life. The life you're living in this kind of meditation is this life of sitting, of practicing your own lived experience here.

Enter into it. Don't hold back. Don't be shy.

So then, here's a description of the first one that involves your imagination. If you'd like to try to follow along:

Just as a skilled bath attendant, or a bath attendant's apprentice, sprinkled bath powder into a metal bowl and then sprinkled it gradually with water, kneading it, massaging it, until the moisture moistens the ball of bath powder, saturates it, permeates it inside and out, yet the ball does not ooze, so too a practitioner fills, pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with the joy and happiness born of being separated from sensual desires and unwholesome states, so that no part of one's body is not touched with it.

So here we have this notion of the whole body. We're back to that. This is a repeated refrain in this tradition: the whole body. Dip into the whole body. Be available to the whole body. Sensitize the whole body.

Then the next one, the second *jhāna*:

It is like a lake that has water welling up from its depths, but which has no water flowing in from the east, south, west, or north, and where the rain god does not occasionally supply it with rainwater. The cool upwelling body of water from the depths would fill, pervade, saturate, and permeate the lake with cool water, so no part of the entire lake would not be touched with cool water.

So also, a practitioner fills, pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with the joy and happiness born of concentration, born of immersion, so that no part of the body is not touched.

This is part of the value of really being sensitive to waking up to our body deep inside. The *yonī*, the source, or the deeper place, the deeper mind, gives birth to a kind of joy, a kind of wholeness, a kind of feeling of happiness that seems inherent in the concentration itself, in the immersion itself, in being absorbed. Something really is set free and begins flowing.

This is partly because so much of our vitality in ordinary life is held in check, held at bay. It doesn't have a chance to surface. We're tense. We're shut off from ourselves. We're shut down. We're distracted. We're caught up.

So we're losing the opportunity of being complete, getting whole, and having all the goodness, the fullness, the amazing resource that our body-mind is for us. Most people live a limited life. The Buddha used that language explicitly, "limited," when he talked about greed, hate, and delusion.

Then we're limited. To somehow begin dropping those limits, dissolving those limits, softening those limits, and allowing the body's, the deep mind's, capacity to be alive.

Then the next image—again, it's a water image, and you'll see—it really knows about immersion:

It is just like a pool of blue lotuses, a pool of red lotuses, or a pool of white lotuses, where some of the blue, red, and white lotuses would be born in the water, would grow in the water, would be nourished by the water, without ever rising out of the water. The cool water would fill, pervade, saturate, and permeate the flowers from their roots to their tips, so no part of the blue, red, and white lotuses would not be touched with cool water.

So these beautiful lotuses, they're floating in water, underwater. No one touched. The water's clear. It's very still.

The first lake image was one of flowing water, where the joy, the well-being, the vitality—something's flowing within us. Then, with time, something relaxes. Something settles. Quiet. A deeper contentment. A deeper sense of well-being.

Being cozy. Being settled. Being safe. Being confident. This too is immersed.

I think the idea of all these beautiful lotus flowers is that, at some point, when the mind is really peaceful—not making things up, reacting, having preferences—the mind's ability to see becomes kind of precious. Everything that's seen in this state is just beautiful. Imagine that. No matter where you look, it's beautiful.

Every sensation. Every breath. Everything just has beauty.

In the last image, it is as though a person were sitting, covered from head down with a white cloth, so there's no part of one's whole body that is not covered with that white cloth. So now they're out of the water. The water went from flowing to being still, and now there's no water. There's just open space, and the body is indistinct.

You look at the body as covered with a white sheet. Being covered with a sheet in ancient India was protection from flies. They didn't have fly repellent and mosquito repellent, so they covered themselves. It was also a common sight.

But the body of that person is looking indistinct. You know it's a person there, but you don't see so much of the details, the characteristics of their skin and their hair and their nose. Those kind of disappear. There's just a vague kind of sense of a person there.

So from the inside out, the same thing happens. It just feels like the body seems to disappear, or become very vague, or soft, quiet. Some people spend a tremendous amount of time and money concerned with all the different details of their body, trying to get it just right. These days, you can have a designer body.

But all that concern drops away. There's something so much more sublime and so much nicer than preoccupation with the body. Anyway, the body just gets soft, very, very soft, indistinct.

So this is—I did think this talk would be a little bit like guided meditation, so maybe I'll get away with reading some more. This is going through the whole thing, not just the imagery.

Separated from sensual desire and unwholesome states—a practitioner enters and abides in the first *jhāna*, which is characterized by joy and happiness born from that separation, and accompanied with thinking and examination.

One fills, pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with a joy and happiness born of separation, so that no part of one's body is not touched by it. Just like a skilled bath attendant or bath attendant's apprentice pours bath powder into a metal bowl and sprinkles it gradually with water, massages it, kneads it, until the moisture moistens the ball of bath powder, saturates it, permeates it inside and out, yet the ball itself does not ooze.

So too, a person fills, pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with the joy and happiness born of separation, so that no part of one's body is not touched with it.

This idea of kneading, and in the description earlier, that it involves thought and examination. Some people will say, some teachers emphasize, that there's still a little bit of thinking going on, and a little bit of evaluation, a little bit of exploring. Like, oh, you're thinking about the breathing, about the body, thinking about the present.

It's kind of like: stay here, come back, place your attention there, be with the inhale. So your thinking now is involved as part of the attentional faculties that are helping you stay.

What is this? To feel it more fully, one of the classic metaphors for this kind of way of being present, to feel more fully, be more connected, and have your thoughts help you do that, is polishing a brass bowl. You have to take the cloth and touch the brass bowl, and then you rub it, feeling it.

So it's like a tactile reference point for here. Touch the breath, the inhale. Stay there and feel it the whole way through. That's considered two different movements.

With the help of thinking, stay here. Feel this all the way through. Stay here. That's the massage.

Connect and stay. Connect and stay. Over and over again. At some point, you get into a rhythm of doing this, staying present, staying here.

It's not like just saying, "I'm going to be present and never leave this breath again." It's more of a dynamic, rhythmic process of staying here, massaging, coming back, pushing the scooter, pushing the scooter, pushing the scooter, until the scooter finally comes to a little hill and you don't have to push it anymore.

So there's a wholesome engagement, involvement, and that starts bringing a kind of joy. The joy of doing, of involving. The joy of doing this without any unwholesome states. Feeling so lucky.

I've been dealing with the hindrances for the last week, and now they're not there. Now I'm just there, pedaling the bike, pushing the scooter, flapping the wings, soaring, flapping the wings, polishing the bowl. Then the movement is to simplification and more stillness.

For a while, you still have to apply yourself. Then, at some point, there's no need. You've come to the hill, and now the scooter can just roll without being pushed anymore. The bird doesn't need to flap its wings. Now it's been caught by the updraft.

With the stilling of thinking and examination, a practitioner enters and abides in the second *jhāna*, consisting of joy and happiness born of concentration, born of immersion, born of unification: an inner tranquility, an inner unification, a unification of mind, free from thinking and examination.

The practitioner fills, pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with a joy and happiness born from this immersion, so that no part of the body is not touched.

It is just like a lake that has water welling up from its depths, but which has no water flowing in from the east, south, west, or north, and where the rain gods do not occasionally supply it with rainwater.

There's no external stimuli. There's no wonderful external things that are coming in to excite you, delight you, or depress you. There's no more interest, for this immersion, in looking beyond yourself for what's important. There's no more waiting for the world to change for you to be happy, or have joy, or pleasure.

It's all going to well up from the inside. So the rain, the water, is not coming from the outside.

Instead, the cool upwelling body of water would fill, pervade, saturate, and permeate the lake with cool water, so that no part of the entire lake would not be touched with cool water. So also, a practitioner fills, pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with a joy and happiness born of immersion, so that no part of the body is not touched.

Then, with the fading away, the dissolving of that joy, a practitioner abides equanimous, aware with clear comprehension, experiencing happiness with the body. The practitioner enters and abides in the third *jhāna*, which the noble ones declare: "Equanimous and aware, one abides in happiness."

The practitioner pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with happiness, freed of joy, so that no part of the body is not touched.

So there's no more joy, but something quieter: the happiness.

It is just like a pool of blue lotuses, a pool of red lotuses, a pool of white lotuses, where some of the blue, red, and white lotuses would be born in the water, would grow in the water, would be nourished by the water, without ever rising out of the water. The cool water would fill, pervade, saturate, and permeate them from their tips to their roots, so no part of the blue, red, or white lotuses would not be touched with the cool water.

So the practitioner pervades, saturates, and permeates this body with a happiness free of joy, so that no part of this body is not touched.

And then abandoning pleasure and pain—what a strange idea! Abandoning pleasure and pain. With the previous disappearance of mental happiness and mental suffering, one enters and abides, with neither pain nor pleasure, in the purity of equanimous awareness of the fourth *jhāna*.

One sits pervading this body with a pure, clear mind, so that no part of the entire body is untouched by the pure, clear mind.

Before, it was touched by the joy and the happiness, which is represented by the water. Now joy and happiness fall away, and what replaces it is a clear mind, a clarity of awareness. Everything gets very simple. The body is not so strong anymore.

The body is like this: it is as though a person were sitting covered from head down with a white cloth, so there is no part of the whole body that is not covered by that white cloth.

I've always assumed that the person covered with a white cloth has just come out of the lake and is completely refreshed and clean, sitting there in this clean, refreshed way, covered by this cozy blanket. I've always assumed it was a white blanket, a white sheet, so that this wonderful white sunlight could come in and create this wonderful luminous inner tent for the person. It's just this wonderful, clear mind, lit-up mind.

So, in some ways, these are quite evocative images. In some ways, these maybe sound out of reach. But they are not. They're in reach. It is possible.

It does take a lot of letting go. Letting go of the things that divide you. Letting go of the things that limit you. Letting go of the things that agitate you. It takes a lot of sincerity.

In Japanese Buddhism, and Japanese culture in general, they put a tremendous value on sincerity, which is kind of being true to yourself and offering yourself fully in a clear, generous way. To mean what you say. To offer what you can in a full way. Not hold back. Not limit yourself.

Not be there for insincere reasons, for greed or for hatred. This is so important that there's this famous story of Zen Master Suzuki Rōshi, someone asking him, "If I do Zen practice, will I get enlightened?" Then the master replied, "If your practice is sincere, it's almost as good."

The final quote to read:

Just as the river Ganges flows, slopes, and inclines toward the east, so too a *bhikkhu* who cultivates the four *jhānas*, who makes full the four *jhānas*, will flow to *nibbāna*, slope to *nibbāna*, incline toward *nibbāna*.

Or, with my favorite translation for *nibbāna*: a practitioner who cultivates these four immersions, who makes full the four immersions, will flow to release, slope to release, incline toward release, toward freedom.

So, drop from the control tower into this body. Open up a sensitivity that is sensitive to the whole body as you breathe, so that there's a wonderful location within for you to dip in, immerse yourself in. In a sense, give yourself over to your dharmic body within.

I would like to request of you that you put aside any idea that you can't do this. Rather, allow yourself to do it in your own way, to the degree that you can. Sincerely enter into your dharmic body and be content that you're doing it your own way with what's possible now, as opposed to being afraid of it or afraid of yourself.