

Friday Dharma talk

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In the stories of the Buddha's last days, there's an account of one of his last teachings. In this teaching, you know, he's an old man, in his 80s. The text describes him as being, at this point, bent over in his old age. The only time he's not in pain is when he's in deep meditation. It's not the usual idealistic presentation of the Buddha that we have, where he's just always radiantly peaceful and has no challenges. Maybe he wasn't challenged, but he did say that he was in pain, and the only time not to be in pain was in deep meditation.

They didn't have the painkillers we have now, so they knew he was dying. They say that when a teacher knows they're dying, their teachings become the best. So he said, "Abide with yourselves as an island, with yourselves as a refuge, with no other refuge. With the *Dhamma* as an island, with the *Dhamma* as a refuge, with no other refuge."

Here, an island is usually understood as being a place that's safe from the floods and the waves and all kinds of dangers. So, the island is a refuge, and there's two refuges here. "With no other refuge," it says for each of them. So, the first one is yourself, and the second one is the *Dhamma*. It seems like the only possible way to reconcile these two statements is to see them as the same.

You yourself can be a refuge. You yourself are the *Dhamma*. The *Dhamma* isn't something to study; it's something to become. And how do we do so? Then the Buddha goes on to explain how you make yourself a refuge, how you make the *Dhamma* your only refuge, and once again he points back to ourselves.

It's when you abide, observing the body in reference to the body; when you observe feelings in reference to feelings; when you observe the mind in reference to the mind; and when you observe the *dhammās*, the mental activities and processes, in terms of the mental activities. This is how you make yourself a refuge. This is how you make the *Dhamma* your refuge.

So, the way you make yourself a refuge, the way the *Dhamma* becomes alive in you, is observing, settling back, and being able to see the body in terms of the body. Usually, that's understood to mean not in terms of the advertisements you're reading or commercials, not in terms of the trends of your times, and not in terms of other people's bodies. Not in terms of your own body in the past or the future, your ideals, but simply in terms of its own sake: how it is, how it experiences itself. The body, in and of itself, has a lot less problems with itself than people have with their bodies.

And then feelings, in terms of feelings, just without any references to associations and meaning-making in relationship to it. Very simple. Just the feelings in and of themselves. Just the mind and mind states in and of themselves. Just the mental activities as they're occurring in and of themselves.

And this is a phenomenal statement, that the Buddha equates refuge—a powerful word in Buddhism—not in the Buddha, *Dharma*, *Saṅgha*, but you become the refuge for yourself. You become the *Dhamma* in this very simple act of settling back and observing, watching, seeing the living, dynamic activity of body, feelings, mind, and mental activities as they're occurring in a very simple way.

And I've emphasized now over this retreat, you know, this idea of a process of simplification. Becoming simpler. Part of this simplicity is being just willing and trusting to be present without a past and a future. To the degree to which a past is still around, it'll be around after the retreat. To the degree to which the future is coming, it's still coming, too. And at the very best, you know, we don't know much about it.

But for this time, just now, some people find this amazingly relieving. What a relief to be able to trust, to feel like it's okay to have permission to just be here without concerns about past and future. And then, in the simplicity of each thing in and of itself as it appears, it also can be a tremendous relief.

If we've been living with a lot of judgments about ourselves, our body, our feelings, our mind, and mental activities, where we define ourselves by this and try to fix ourselves by changing all this, it can be a lot of work. And to have permission for a period of time to not have to do any of that, to put it down, to live a simple life—to breathe easily, to be at ease here and now. Of course, it's not easy to do. But the alternative might be easy to do, but it's exhausting.

It's easy sometimes to worry a lot. It's just second nature, born to worry. It's easy to be angry. It's easy to have resentments. I mean, we slip into it so easily. It's easy to plan futures that never come.

It's easy to correct the past so you have a better past, to get involved in those activities. But sooner or later, we discover this is exhausting. It's stressful. What's harder to do is to do the thing which is easeful, that isn't tiring: that settling, reassuring, the opening to a kind of deep peace and understanding. In some ways, the difficult thing to do is to not do so much.

The difficult thing to do is to let the thinking mind, the planning mind, the fixing mind, the figuring-out mind, the wanting mind, have a break. But here in this quote, the Buddha calls it a refuge, a place that you're safe. And so, the idea: the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. When you're established in them, when you're connected to them, you become safe.

And the primary refuge and safety is from yourself, from that part of you that is not aligned or in harmony with the *Dharma*, with what is wholesome. When we do react, when we do get angry or greedy, when we do get caught up in fear, we are kind of creating stress for ourselves. And the paradox is that some of the things we're afraid of are things to be afraid of. I mean, the doing of the fear, the spinning with it, and holding on to it, and reliving over and over again the stories and ideas and memories. It's so easy for the mind to fall into that.

It's almost second nature, as I say, but we end up causing more stress. And what's going to protect us from that stress? The healthy way of doing that is to practice clear enough seeing and wise enough seeing. To be able to relate to whatever is going on in a supportive way, a wise way, a friendly way, a caring way. To be able to be present in a way that doesn't perpetuate the stress.

And of course, this is not easy to do, but it's considered to be a noble thing to do. It's considered to be one of the greatest things you can do in this life: to move toward this kind of peace. And so, coming here to a place like IRC for a retreat is a way of starting to live a simpler life that has less to figure out, less you have to do, which supports, hopefully, things getting quieter and simpler.

Going into the wilderness, under a tree, in an empty building, sitting down, and holding the body erect, and recognizing your ability to be aware, to be here and present. And while you're present here, to be breathing in and breathing out. So you've come to a quiet place. IRC is considered to be empty enough to qualify for this instruction, and to sit up straight. Metaphorically, even figuratively, holding oneself upright.

Here, I'm fond of the teaching that exists some places in Buddhism. The spot in India under the Bodhi tree where the Buddha was enlightened is called the *Bodhi Maṇḍa*, the Bodhi spot. And the teaching is that wherever you're sitting, wherever you're meditating, that's your body *maṇḍala*. I love this teaching because it kind of gives a kind of reverence, respect—maybe,

I don't know if you like this kind of language—but a sacredness to where you are, the time you're in, here and now.

Here and now is special, sacred. It's valuable. And here, you're allowed to become simple. You're allowed to relax the tensions. You're allowed to soften the shoulders and the belly. You're allowed to release the thighs.

Maybe you discover that even with your hands resting on your lap, they're a little bit tight, pulled in, almost as if they're trying to grip something. Here, you can relax your face. Not a few of us have a social face, and then we live in this social face with its tensions or its smiles or its something or other. But here, everything's allowed to relax while we sit upright.

And it's remarkable to discover that the thinking mind can be tense, can be tight, constricted. And to begin getting a sense that it's possible to relax it, to soften it. What a wonderful thing! It's a remarkable and exceptional, unusual phenomenon for a person, a human being, to actually know that they're thinking and to see the effect that thinking has on them: that thinking is exhausting, that thinking is stressful, that thinking produces contractions and tightness, that thinking produces a mood music that casts its influence on our mood.

And in this movement toward simplification, the time will come where you see, recognize, know for yourself—that's the hallmark of this practice—to know for yourself. You'll know for yourself that you don't have to be contentious with anything. You don't have to argue with it or have a disagreement with it. In this very close-in world, on your body *maṇḍala*, here on this spot, this time, in this body, you don't have to actively activate that which gets tense, ready to fight.

You don't have to activate what is not here and now, not necessary, which is also very unusual for human beings. To not be sometimes almost constantly involved in preferences, wants, desires, and aversions; building a self up, constructing a self, proving a self, defending a self. So, at some point, for oneself, start realizing: “Oh, I don't have to be for and against everything all the time.” There's a wonderful alternative: to be non-contentious, to not be in conflict with how things are and how things are unfolding, just here with this.

So, of course, there's going to be other challenges. Of course, there's going to be greed. But to have the clarity of mind to see it and know it: greed is happening. I'm not greedy. The mind is not greedy. It's a mind with greed.

And part of the reason we can start seeing this is because of the strength of knowing, the strength of feeling. To really clearly know that greed is present is not to be locked into the greed. It's kind of the equivalent of taking one or two steps away, turning around and looking

at it, and saying, “I see you. There's greed.”

I once heard a teacher give the suggestion to someone that they were really troubled by something. I don't remember what it was. Maybe it was thinking, and maybe the teacher had given them lots of different instructions. None of it worked. Finally, the teacher said, “You've tried mental noting, but you should do the mental noting much louder in your mind. Like, really be definitive and say it really loud.”

Somehow, that gets the attention. That finally gets you to step away, really to see there's a difference between the knowing and the challenge. Oh, okay.

I also heard someone once suggest to someone who was troubled with their thinking, “Oh, it's okay. Just start thinking much louder. Think emphatically. Think whatever you're doing, but do it with great emphasis. Like this is the most important thing in the world, and everyone needs to hear. But do it in your own mind.”

But just really kind of get behind it. Don't just do this casual thinking, you know. It kind of wanders in and out, and you feel like you're just the victim of it, that it's just coming. I mean, you should, at one point, do it. Get behind it. Make it emphatic, loud. Choose your words carefully. Do it. If you're going to do it, do the best job you can.

So, whatever it takes to step one or two steps away and kind of see what you're doing and not believe in it anymore, not be seduced. Quietly seduced. Quietly, the thinking comes in through the back door, and pretty soon you know it, like you're living it. Whatever it takes. But to see, and just to see and see it. You don't have to be in conflict with it, but you want to step away so things can be simpler.

So, some of the things that start happening when things become simpler and there's more knowing, there creates a space between the knowing and what we know. There's a space between the knowing and what we're feeling, the sensations we have. And this space begins to create more space for the mind, and the mind gets more expansive. The mind doesn't become so contracted, so tight. It no longer becomes scattered and spinning.

So in this third foundation of mindfulness, after saying one knows a mind with greed as such, a mind with ill will as such, a mind with delusion as such, it goes on and says one also can know a contracted mind as a contracted mind. One can know a scattered mind as a scattered mind, because sometimes, with our preoccupations, the mind gets all tight and small. Some people feel like it's a really small mind. And sometimes it's the opposite. The mind just gets scattered. It's just kind of jumping around and fragmented and going from one thing to the next.

So it's possible to see that, to know that, to look at that. That's how it is right now. And as soon as you step back and say, "Oh, this is what's here," it's kind of now you're given space. As soon as you find that place of not being in contention, not fighting it or believing it or using it as a way of criticizing yourself, it's just a scattered mind. It's just a contracted mind. Just a mind with greed.

And this, I think, has been one of the great words to have used. I have added to my kind of mental noting the word "just." It's just. Sometimes I just use the word by itself. Just watching something, seeing something happen, I say, "Oh, just, just that, just," and that creates space.

And so, at some point, the scattered mind quiets down. The contracted mind opens up. And at some point, we can feel that the mind is expansive. And so in this third foundation of mindfulness, it says, "One knows an expanded mind as an expanded mind."

And now, it's not a mind with expansion, but now the whole mind is characterized this way. The nature of the mind feels large, feels like it has spaciousness. The word in Pāli is *mahā*. *Mahā* is, I think, a big word that's bigger than big, giant, big, huge. I don't think that's so exciting, to have a huge mind, but an expanded mind may be a little more inviting.

And like there's space in the mind, there's room, there's breathing room for our thoughts, our feelings, what goes on. Things have gotten simple enough, maybe quiet enough, maybe things have slowed down a bit. Mind not jumping so much, and we can know what's happening. And the very knowing is an opening, is a relaxing into. The knowing has a tail of just kind of, "Oh, this."

It's like you're here to discover, "What is that? What is this?" And so that creates space, space for your experience. Not rushing ahead to the next one. Not rushing to the conclusions. Just this, this, just this.

And so slowly, the mind can start feeling much bigger and more expansive, until the time comes when the very kind of expansiveness of the mind, the big mind, becomes noteworthy, becomes, wow. And so then you don't go, "Wow," maybe if you can help it. But you go, "Oh, this is an expanded mind. I see it. I know it. Look at that."

And the paradox—or if paradox is the right word—but the very thing that it is becomes even bigger when you know it. When you know it, "Oh, this is an expanded mind," and you just open up to feel that, open up to be with that, let that register more fully, then expanded mind expands even bigger. Until such a time comes when it doesn't make sense to make it bigger, because at some point it just doesn't. It feels like not that it fills the universe, but it feels like

it has no boundaries. It has no edge to it. Awareness has no skin holding it in place.

So we know the edge. What's the edges of your field of awareness? If you look up into the sky, maybe in daytime, maybe at night, what's the edges of your seeing? Does your seeing have an edge? Well, it's in that blue ceiling up there, but there's no blue ceiling up there. And the night sky—it's a blackness, an edge, but there's no edge.

To realize that seeing in situations like that has no edges. Awareness with no edges. And then it's easier in that kind of mind to just know something for what it is in its simplicity, in its pristine simplicity. There's an ache in the vast, empty sky of the mind, just an ache. But when we're constricted and claustrophobic and kind of caught up in the middle of it, it's a big deal.

But when there's lots of room, pain is a lot easier. When there's lots of room for a thought, it's possible to leave the thought alone and not take it for a ride or be taken for a ride with it. The metaphor that's often used in Buddhism is that a thought can arise like a cloud in an endless sky, a simple cloud in an endless sky.

Maybe that's why I went up to the High Sierras a few years ago and had lunch in some spot. We were kind of on the east side, so we were looking west to the western kind of ridges. And I don't know if you know this, but the way the ocean moisture comes in across the Central Valley, it gets lifted up by the Sierra Mountains, fairly high. The moisture goes up, and so we were watching the sky.

The sky was completely blue, and then every once in a while, a little cloud would form. Like, where did that come from? It got made out of nothing. It's just empty sky, and a little cloud forms. It drifts a little bit, and then it disappears. What happened? What happened?

Endless, you know, cloud drifting in an endless sky. It was kind of mesmerizing, beautiful to watch. So a thought can be like that. It appears. Where did it come from? There, and where did it go?

Chances are that you'll recognize that most of your thinking is stickier than that. Most of your thinking is not a thought. I like to say that there's thinking and thinking. Thinking is what the mind does. Thinking is what you do when you get involved with the thoughts.

And then it goes on to say in this text, it says that one knows an ultimate mind as an ultimate mind. The supreme mind is a supreme mind, and one knows a not-so-supreme mind as not-so-supreme. And I believe what this is talking about is that there are times when we're practicing and we're concentrated, still, quiet, especially in *samādhi*, where one gets a taste of what an ultimate mind is like.

And this is a quote I read the other day. We talked about the bliss of renunciation. The practice of *samādhi* provides the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of awakening, of *nibbāna*. There's something about *samādhi* that brings the mind into a state that's very healthy, very, very healthy, very peaceful. That is a foretaste of what full awakening is like.

And so, in *samādhi*, you can kind of feel, “Oh, this is a kind of ultimate. This is, like, really great.” And you're allowed to see that. You're like, “Oh, this is good.” To see it and to know it. It's also very different than seeing it, opening the mind and wanting more, getting attached to it, getting afraid of it.

And that's what the *Satipaṭṭhāna* is supposed to protect us from. To really be present, to really see clearly what's going on. You're being protected from then getting attached to things. But on the way to that safety, you have to be sharp enough to see that you're attached. “Oh, there it is! Who would have guessed?”

Well, it's okay that I got attached this time because, wow, it was pretty impressive. I actually managed to go four seconds without any attachments. It was a record. Or, you know, anyway.

So, when one begins to appreciate that there is a mind that has the potential, the capacity, to not be caught, and that uncaught mind, that mind that's unified, centered here, it is a healthy mind. And it's something that you yourself can experience. And the fact that it's a foretaste for awakening makes awakening not so reified, not such an ideal, super-idealistic thing, like something you can't understand or figure out, or, you know, it doesn't make any sense or something.

Now it makes sense. You've tasted it. This is something you can experience for yourself. Wow! This is what it's like to have a mind that is gathered, settled on itself, at home in itself, comfortable with itself, not fighting itself, not fighting anything.

And then it goes on to say, “One knows a steadied mind as a steadied mind,” or “a settled mind as a settled mind.” Some people will translate it as “a concentrated mind as a concentrated mind,” but the word is not *samādhi*. It's a somewhat related word, but I like the word “steadied.”

So, to have some degree of peace, some degree of mind present, or some degree of our very beingness settled on itself, or at home here, where we're not inclined to lean forward, lean backward, to want and not want, to build and create. To be involved in our ego and egotistical ideas, and to value it: this is good. And the art of steadying ourselves there, coming to rest in that, or being steady in that. This is important. This is invaluable.

Don't get attached to it. Don't strain to make it better. But settle into it. Settle into it. Let the settling, the simplification, into it, into this *Bodhi Maṇḍa*, this place of awakening here, steady. And so, to recognize, "Oh, there's steadiness here. I'm steady in this now." One knows a steadied mind as a steadied mind.

One of the really important stepping stones or turning points for me in doing Benchsha Buddha's meditation practice was to realize, at various times, I started realizing—it took a lot of sittings, usually happened on retreat where you watch your mind much more carefully and repeatedly—sitting, I started to see that I had these very subtle, almost invisible beliefs, thoughts that I was living by. That, you know, was undermining the very meditation I was doing.

And one of them was: if it's happening to me, it's not the real thing. Yes, I'm mindful, but this is not what mindfulness really is. Yes, I'm kind of settled, but this is not what *Dharma* settling is—not the real one. Yes, I'm somewhat concentrated, but this is not the real concentration.

Because, you know, there was nothing that I could do that was the real thing. It's always somehow, because it was mine, inadequate. It was off. It was, you know, how could I possibly do it right? I don't know.

So, I mean, it wasn't logical, but there, buried deep in my mind, I had to get quiet enough to see, was this constant? Was this a policy? And it kept me a little bit agitated. It kept me a little bit contracted. It kept me a little bit doubting, resisting, holding myself back, or overlooking, or spinning a little bit.

And what a difference it made to see that. And I didn't conclude the opposite: everything that happens to me is right. But I stopped believing that everything was wrong, that everything was not the right, real one. It became more like, "Okay, this is my experience. This is what's happening to me. I'll just be here with this. I'll know this."

If I'm calm, this is the best calm I have. I'll take it. So someone said, "That's the wrong calm, Gil." I said, "Well, maybe so for you, but this is what I got. I'll be content and happy with this."

Do I have the right *jhāna*? I don't know. Do I have any *jhāna*? I don't know. I don't care. I have a *samādhi* right now. Is it the real *samādhi*? Who cares? It's the one I got.

Everything is onward leading. It's okay to accept what you have. It's okay to be with how you are. It's the right one, whatever it is. The right anger, sure, why not? The right desire, sure, why not?

But then, don't fight it, but don't give in to it. But just—it's onward leading here. Be present for it. You don't have to doubt. Don't have to criticize. Don't have to defend. Just be present. See, know, feel, watch. Be with it.

So that you can feel where the movement toward wholesomeness is, the movement toward freedom is, the movement toward space, the movement toward non-contention, the movement toward being stress-free with it all. And if you do that, you'll be protected. It'll be a refuge for you from getting pulled in and caught, and chasing things, and wanting things, and trying to fix things, and believing this is what you have to do.

Just step back, watch, see, be here. Trust this process of simplification. And if you start feeling a little bit of an expanded mind, just take it as the real one. It's real enough. If you start having a mind that feels pretty wonderful, accept it as wonderful. It's okay. It's yours.

And if you find that your mind is steadying, take it as good. Give yourself the benefit of the doubt. Give yourself a chance to settle in, to be with how things are, to relax, to open. Give yourself a chance to not be fighting and struggling and trying to make it perfect.

Don't waste time. Don't waste time thinking that you're not the right you. If it's you, it's you, and that is the very person who makes themselves a refuge, makes themselves an island. The very person who can become the *Dharma*. You become the *Dharma*, and the *Dharma* comes out of you. Thank you.