

Tuesday Dharma talk, week 3

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The process of simplification, as I've emphasized on this retreat, is sometimes called a process of deconstruction, where we're deconstructing all the complicated constructions that we've built up, maybe over a lifetime, or even the constructions you've built up since you came to IRC. If you've never been here before, there was a time none of you had been here before. And slowly, there's built up these ideas about higher C, and how to be here, and how things work, and what works for you, what you like and don't like, and what things mean, and what's yours: your place, your favorite places. So all these things have meaning and purpose and value that they didn't have when you first walked in. You kind of had no associations with the place, so you've constructed a whole IRC in your head. Hopefully, the very practice we do deconstructs that for you, so you don't have to carry it with you.

There's a wonderful, famous story from Ajahn Chah, where he points to a really big boulder and says to the student, "Is that boulder heavy?" And the student maybe says, "Of course, it's heavy." And he says, "No, no. Sitting there, it is not heavy for you. It's only heavy if you get attached to it." Something like that. So, the heaviness of what we get attached to and what we hold on to—we're deconstructing, releasing, letting go, simplifying.

And one way of understanding this is that we're relaxing and quieting, to go from coarser activities, states of mind, activities of mind, to quieter, simpler, subtler, more refined activities and states. And it's possible for this onward-leading nature to feel a little bit like, "Oh, this is still. I thought I was pretty calm, but now that I've been calm like this for a while, I can feel there's still a little bit of agitation, a little bit of effort, a little bit of pressure there. There's something there that's not calm, and I can imagine this getting calmer." The movement from joy and concentration to happiness is a movement toward calmer, more settled, quieter states, quieter activities of the mind. So it's kind of nice because it lets the mind rest. It leads not just to rest, but to a kind of peace.

It's easier, from that peaceful, quiet mind, to appreciate how exhausting it is to live in our minds the way it can be sometimes, occasionally, in the world. No wonder we're tired. When I was sitting in Burma, I think I had been on retreat, like you are here, for four months. The difference was that I did all my sitting and most of my walking in my room. There was a little hallway outside where there was never anybody. So it was a very simple, quiet place to be practicing, and I'd done it for four months.

I hadn't really talked to anyone for four months except for the practice discussions with the abbot. And then something happened. I don't know what it was. Maybe the abbot went away for a little bit, or so. Anyway, I don't know if I called it taking a day off, but I took some time off to do my laundry, which had to be done by hand. There was an American monk there who saw that I wasn't sitting and walking, so he used that as an opportunity to come and talk to me.

I think we talked for about twenty minutes, maybe less. And by the time we finished, I was exhausted. I literally went back to bed and slept for thirty minutes. Why do we get activated? Why do we get exhausted? What are we doing? What's the work we're doing? What's the extra that we're adding that's so tiring?

So, in the process of the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, this last foundation of mindfulness, the first three steps there are a process of deconstruction, of simplification. And the deepest simplification comes from the third one. So first, there's the hindrances. Then there's these five things that don't have a name but are the things that we create bundles of. And these are the constructions we make—very simple constructions, projections that we lay on top of reality.

And then the third one focuses on something that's usually called, in English translations, a fetter, and it's something that binds. And the word, probably the word *saṃyojana*, apparently also means a knot, so you put it all together: entanglement. And the word, the *yoga* of *saṃyojana*, you know it a little bit because it's related to the word *yoga*. The word *yoga* comes from the ancient Indo-European root that means to yoke, to bring together, to join something.

And they say that the word *yoga* is used in *yoga* because originally *yoga* was the yoking of mind, body, and spirit together into one unified thing. So it was a joining together of what is often operating separately. And in some ways, we're doing that too here—at least mind and body, bringing them together. So one of the reasons it can feel so healthy to do this practice is the unification.

But in the word *saṃyojana*, I sometimes will translate it as knots, fetters. It's sometimes used

in relationship to having a yoke of oxen. It's an animal that has a yoke, like two animals that have a yoke tying them together. The two oxen are not free; they're bound to each other by this yoke, this wooden beam framework that goes over their necks. So, at some point in practice, in this deconstruction and simplification, we begin to appreciate how the mind operates under the control of these yokes, or gets absorbed under the control of attachments and desires, where you have forfeited your freedom to these impulses.

The forfeiting of your freedom to these impulses of desire, of different types, is likened to having a yoke over your neck. The person who's in charge of the yoke, you know, as you go left and right—the thing in charge of the yoke is desires. So desire is one thing, but desire is what creates this entanglement. But the reason it's understood to be this process of simplification is that when we're still enough, quiet enough, and mindfulness is clear enough, we no longer have stories about things. So, no more hindrances.

We no longer have projections on top of things. We're not constructing simple projections of what things are. But we're still in the world, and there are sounds, sights, smells, tastes, touches, and, in Buddhism, the six senses. There's thoughts. There's activity in the mind.

So each of those has a sense door, has one of the six senses that registers these activities. When there's a sight object in front of us, the eye sees it, or visual capability sees it. When there's a sound, like me speaking, there's the ear that hears it. With a smell, there's a nose that smells it. With taste, the tongue tastes it. A tactile object touches us, and there's a body that feels it.

A thought arises, and the mind's inner sense, inner eye, sees it, knows it, recognizes it. It's pretty basic. I think you learned it already. If I repeat it, you'll get bored. But it's pretty basic, simple.

And as we practice, it gets quieter and quieter. We're not projecting and building things. This is what we see. We're living, we're swimming, in this world of direct sense contact. And then we have the opportunity to start seeing where we've lost our freedom, how we get yoked, entangled with a sight object, a sound, a smell, a taste, a thought in the mind, a tactile object.

If you're not quiet and still enough and clear enough in your mind, from the time you get up from here in the meditation hall—or wherever you're sitting, maybe at home meditating—to the place where you get your tea, you might have ten thousand sensations that come in. Many, many, many, many. Just walking from here down to the dining room, there can be a little something extra. It isn't just hearing sound and letting it be. There's a leaning into it. There's an interest. There's a desire to know.

There's a grabbing on. "What is that sound? What is that sight? What is that smell? What is that?" I guess, when you're having your tea, "What is that taste? I thought I put a ginger tea bag in, and this doesn't taste like that." So, I can imagine that I would get up from sitting here, meditating in the meditation hall, being on retreat, and feel fairly still and concentrated and mindful. "Ah, this is good. It's been hard two weeks, and finally I've arrived, and I'm here, and I'm just present for things in a simple way."

"I'm going to stay. I'm going to stay really close. I'm going to be just there with each." I'm going to get up now and walk out and go down the steps and go figure out what I'm going to do next. So I get up. It's very nice. I'm mindful. Maybe I even manage to be present with the steps going down.

I feel the texture of the carpet there, and maybe need a little extra help because I'm so present that I hold the handrail, and that's smooth right there. I get to the bottom, to the floor, and feel the different texture of the floor, and understand that I have to turn to the left. Just turning to the left. And then the thought: "This is my chance to have tea. I'm going to do walking meditation to the tea place, just because I'm so good right now, like a simple walking."

I do one, two steps into the community hall, and someone walks through carrying a rake. "A rake? What are they carrying a rake here for?" I look more carefully. "What's this about? Where are they going? What's happening?" And maybe I know a monastic—the basic kind of role, a monastic's job, is to sweep and rake. "Maybe I should become a monastic. That would be really nice."

But I'm walking, so stepping one step, and then I see the carpet that's down there. "Oh, that carpet. Yeah, no one else is around. You know, I have money in my socks. I think it's okay to walk on that. So nice to walk on it. I think my walking meditation will be so delicious if I just go on that carpet." And yeah, I'm gonna go over there, and I take two steps on the carpet, so mindful, and then I notice the bulletin board.

"Well, that's important. What's that? There's no notes. Oh, but there's a note for the teachers. That's interesting. Oh, well, I wonder what they write for the teachers. And what's that I see there? Wait a minute. It says in big—it says it's addressed to Guilt. Guilt? I mean, who's Guilt? I mean, they must mean Gil. And what has he done?"

I mean, he had a day off, kind of, and he must have gone gambling because G and Gil both have Gs in them. So what's he doing gambling? And this is like, "What am I doing here, gambling teacher?" And then about then, "Oh, I'm supposed to be walking." Another few steps, I get closer, and I say, "Oh, it doesn't say Guilt. It says 'Gilly.' Why would somebody say

‘Gilly’?”

But that's very affectionate, though, and that's nice. Maybe it's okay. Maybe I was a little bit exaggerated with my thoughts and went galloping. “Oh yeah, tea. It's walking meditation. Let's take another step.” And then someone else walks in with rain boots on. “That's interesting. It's not raining. Why?”

And they're a funny color. “How could they allow that here? Maybe they're carrying mud with them.” And, “Oh yeah, I'm walking.” So that's a silly example, but it's kind of true that, in some way, we don't walk straight to tea. We get distracted in all kinds of ways by the multitude of things happening: sounds, sights. We don't just hear it. We lean toward it.

There's an impulse to see more carefully, to be interested. We might be afraid, so the impulse is to look and turn away. Or there might be desire: want more. And if you're really quiet, you can notice that the impulses to get involved with the sense object happen without your choice. Someone's in charge here, but it isn't you.

It's so instinctual. It's so automatic. Something is going on; there is interest and wanting and looking. And there's not much freedom there for that to be automatic, but it's possible to see. What's fascinating in this process of simplification is that if you're really present before you turn your attention—like there's a sound—before you're... Sometimes I feel like this: my mind kind of starts moving. The whole body physically kind of orients itself, leans, stretches in the direction of the sound.

“What is that?” But the first impulse to be interested, the impulse to take it in and know it more, is seen before the urge. There's the urge—not the impulse, but the urge. Before the act of looking or being interested is seen, and you leave it alone. “Wow, someone walks into the community hall with rain boots on.” You see the urge. No need to follow that urge.

And so the mind can stay peaceful. Some kind of peace is lost. We get a little bit agitated by that interest of the mind that picks up and wants to know more, wants to recognize it, wants to make something of it, interpret it, have a story connected to it. “Wow, your rain boots are great! I think my life would be much better if I had more rain boots. I think that's what I want. Maybe we can sneak into the manager's office in the middle of the night and look up on Amazon the latest and greatest about rain boots.”

So it's gone from a simple interest in what I'm seeing, to making a little story around what it is to have rain boots, to having a strong desire to act on it. So what's fascinating, what's really important in this practice, is that the few times when we get quiet enough, still enough, that we see that yoke, that entanglement, that involvement with sense objects, this is like, in a

way, going to the source or going to the beginning. At the very beginning, before something has grown and grown and grown, until we have major conflicts here at IRC because there are different opinions about what color rainbows we should allow, and this certainly must be very important. It's kind of a ridiculous thing to have conflict about, but people get in conflict all the time.

But to just see where it all began: the eye sees something, and there was an impulse to know it more, to go toward it, to want to know what this is. And that impulse took an action, and that desire led to more desires and more desires. So the desire to look more, to me, unusually evoked an idea. And that idea is just a thought, but then there's the interest in that thought, an urge to take up that thought. "Rain boots, rainbow, rain boots. Oh, I like rain boots. Let's think about it a little bit."

And then I'm thinking about it, and that leads to more and more until we build stories. Each step along the way, there's a movement of a little desire to do more, to follow, to do more and more. And in the teachings of the Buddha, this is likened to having kindling to keep a fire going. We keep putting fire in the kindling, and the fire never goes out. If we could just simply stop feeding it, the fire will die out.

And so it seems so innocent and so simple and, you know, what's the big deal? The big deal about this level is that we're seeing where it all begins before it's gotten complicated. The Buddha, in one place, talks about when it gets full-blown, when all the bundles come together. It's kind of like a big tangled mass of yarn that you can't pull apart. It's just a big knot.

So the knot is so big, and our life grows and grows and grows in complexity with all these different knots. The bundles are all knotted together with each other. But if we can go back and back and back to where it all begins, it's possible to have a lot more agency, a lot more freedom, a lot more choice. "Let's leave it alone. Let's let it be. Rain boots at IRC, let it be. I'm doing walking meditation to the dining room. That's what's important."

"I was in this really nice state. I finally arrived and was present. And I don't need to sacrifice that calm, that centeredness, that being present for each step, and feeling really close and intimate, for the whole thing about rain boots. What a thing to trade! To give up my peace for rain boots? Could they really be that important?" It's a silly example. Probably each of you can give a silly example where you've done something similar.

It's so instinctual, so automatic, that these desires pick up, and we're off to the races, as they say. And before you know it, it's not just a small little thought, recognition, idea, but it's a

whole story, maybe a whole universe you create. And then you come back to the meditation hall, maybe, and meditate, and it quiets down again. It settles, and you realize that the whole world, the universe of rain boots, falls away. And, ah, I'm exhausted. I need to recover from all the desire that was aroused.

So these yokes—we yoke ourselves. And so the metaphor for the yoke that the Buddha gives is that there are these two oxen that are yoked together, and it's the sense door and the sense object. What yokes them is desire, and that's where the oxen lose their freedom. The Buddha also gives the metaphor of the world being a field. The book says barley, and the cows have free rein, free range to go in and just eat the farmer's barley, just eat and eat and eat and eat and eat.

So the idea in this metaphor is that this is the world of sense objects. The word *āyatana*, the word sometimes used in the text, can mean a field. And so the world is our field that we eat in, and we're constantly eating the barley, constantly eating the sense objects, taking them in, holding on. So I can imagine, in a kind of funny way, I hope that for me to have gone through these examples and stories was a bit much for some of you. Maybe even listening to it was a bit exhausting.

And that's maybe indicative of how this whole world works and what's possible—the other side of that exhaustion, or the other side of that holding on or reacting, where we lose our freedom. When we get quiet enough at this level of just seeing a sight object, hearing a hearing object, it's not even necessary to know what it is you're hearing or seeing. The mind doesn't have to put a story, recognition, idea on top of it. There's a loud kind of roar going down the road. It's not necessary to know that it's a car. It's just a sound, a vibrating roar.

It's possible to be very, very simple, and to see how the mind starts making it complicated. The mind gets activated. The mind leans toward it, whatever it is. There may be a loss of being centered—centered in the mind, centered in the body—because there are ever-so-small little micro-muscles in the mind and the head and the body that go along with wanting to turn our head. “What's that sound?”

The impulse is there, but to really be right there as it arises, and just see it as an impulse and leave it alone, not go along with it—there's freedom. And one of the reasons this is so useful is that, again, this metaphor of the stream: if you go into the stream to float, but you think floating requires you to hold tight to the water, to grab the water and hold it, you spend all your time trying to grab the water and hold onto it. You forget to swim, and you drown. But if you understand that to be in the water, floating down the river, you have to understand that the momentum of the water, the buoyancy of the water, will carry you if you just lay down in

it, maybe flat, float on the surface, your whole body, then it will carry you down the river.

So when we are grabbing experience, getting involved in whatever's going on, and even more so if we're building constructs, ideas around it, even more so if we have stories around it, even more so if we build a self, an identity around it—me versus it—then we can't see. Then we're not able to be attuned, to be in harmony, to be connected to how the present moment is always a river of change. And when there's a lot of suffering, it's kind of like the equivalent of drowning in that river.

But to let go of clinging, to just kind of be right there at the sense doors and just see sense experiences coming and going—the senses of the body, sensations of breathing—are lots of little particles of sensations that are coming and going and passing through us. Some people, at some point in practice, feel like their whole body has become an hourglass, and just sand pouring down, moving through, little pieces of particles of sand just moving and flowing. For some people, it's like snowflakes that are not going so fast, but just sparkling everywhere. Some people describe it as pixels that are firing.

So, this very, very raw, simple place of just sense experiences happening without us doing anything, and everything is flowing, everything is changing, everything is dissolving, appearing and disappearing. And it becomes clearer and clearer that there's nothing to cling to. You can't hold on. It's like holding onto water. That water is going to save you from drowning, so you grab it and hold it tight in the fist. That doesn't work.

So the movement of really seeing that clinging, grabbing, resisting at a deep level—it doesn't work. It's a way that we give our freedom away. It's a way that we make it more complicated than it needs to be. This process of simplification becomes, at the end, simplifying, relaxing desires, clinging, cravings, holding on, attachments, reaching to grab. It's quieter and quieter, and it does the mind, it does the heart, a tremendous good to experience itself no longer clinging, no longer clinging.

And it starts making room. This lessening of clinging, lessening of being driven and automatic by desires, starts making a lot of room in the mind, in the heart, in the body, for the *Dharma* to really work in us, the *Dharma* to unfold. The *Dharma* to float us all the way down the river into the ocean.

The last thing I'll say about these fetters is that, in the way the Buddha talks about it in the text, it's similar to how he talks about the hindrances. One knows and recognizes the movement to grab. We see it arise. We know how it arises. And this is one of the times where there's also this little more active side of *Satipaṭṭhāna*, where here he says, “Let go. Abandon. Give

it up.”

Mostly in *Satipaṭṭhāna*, there's no movement to do much more than just be aware, just know and sense, feel, observe what's there. It's a radical kind of non-reactive state where we learn not to do, not to add. But in these two areas, the hindrances and these knots, he talks about giving it up, letting go. We practice some agency. We see the knot, we see our grabbing, we see the movement, and we exhale, let go, stop, release the grip, open the fist, relax the tightness, free yourself from that idea.

And how much we're supposed to be active, and how much we're supposed to be quiet and not—you know, this process of simplification, being non-active, just being with things—that's part of the art of practice. To know when just to know and trust the knowing, and when to have some agency that we act on, that supports the whole process. And that's for you to discover for yourself. Experiment. Sometimes it's obvious. Letting go is easy. You let go, and you're better off.

Other times, it's counterproductive. It makes you agitated, and like you're getting busy. So maybe there are times that you allow for the settling, for dropping that little pebble into the lake, and let the pebble settle to the bottom and be still. And you're there at the bottom, still, quiet, and peaceful. And you see the beginning of a fetter, the beginning of an entanglement. And you let go, so you can be in the flow of life—the flow that is trying to free you.

I believe that in some deep way. There's a deep, deep place that reality within us wants us to be free, and this practice is guiding us to a place where we are no longer bound, caught in any desire at all. Then we're free. Oh. Oh.