

Thursday Dharma talk, week 3

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So to begin with the announcement, tomorrow will be another one of the mostly silent days. There won't be any practice discussion tomorrow or dharma talk. Inez will do a lightly guided meditation at the instructional time, and then the day after tomorrow we'll start up again with cycle one, continuing with our practice here.

And I want to thank you all. For your practice, it is a phenomenal thing to devote this much time to this kind of practice. It's kind of an exceptional thing, even in the Buddhist world, for people to devote this much time to be in a full retreat. And you're all doing well. Thank you, even if you don't think so.

So we're coming to the end, the last what I call exercise, the last exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. So, in some ways, it's the culmination. As I said, it's specifically the exercise which, in lots of other places in the suttas, is called liberating insight. Well, I call liberating insight the insight that leads to liberation. So it's a very significant piece of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

But to introduce it, I want to go back to the beginning, where the text says something like, according to one translation, "There is a direct way." There is a—my preferred way of saying it is—there is a unified way or unifying way, the confluence way, to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of despair and lamentation, for the disappearance of suffering and sadness. And there's just sometimes other translations people use for this. But for now, despair and lamentation—lamentation meaning over-the-top kind of crying—and suffering and sadness.

So these are very basic human emotions, situations that people get into. One of the reasons to engage in this practice is because we have this and other difficult emotions. The word *dukkha*, suffering, here includes a wide range of emotional pain. So it talks about this is how to overcome it, to have it disappear. It's quite a promise.

And then those four words do not appear again in the whole sutta. They don't come up. It's a little bit odd: here I'm going to give you instructions about something, but it doesn't talk about them at all. And some people have pointed out that there's a lot of things missing in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. There's no discussion—you know, we know that occasionally people get angry—and there's no discussion of anger. There's no discussion about other emotions.

I mean, there's a few kind of—they're implied indirectly. There is greed, hate, and delusion. After all, that's something. And then there's difficult hindrances. Some people think of those as emotions. So, you know, getting more human, maybe, but so much of our emotional life is not mentioned in this text.

And if it's to overcome the difficult emotions, why not mention them directly more than just in an introduction? So my proposal for how to understand this is that our difficult emotions are a little bit complicated. But now a fair number of them will be involved in stories, evaluations, connected deeply to our personal histories and to our hopes and aspirations. And to really focus on them directly, it might be a little bit too hard to get in there and work with them directly—in the terms that we have for them, the words we have, the ordinary way in which we relate to them.

And maybe it's very easy then, with the ordinary ways of calling them, understanding them, to somehow come along with attachments, come along with a whole set of beliefs. Some people have manifestos about what we should do with our emotions and how we should do it. And so it may be that addressing them directly is not the most efficient way. Maybe it's not the direct way or the unifying way. Maybe there's another way, and I think that's how I'd like to understand this text.

It says, yes, you have these things. You have difficult emotions, difficult suffering in life. Now here is how you can meet it—not on the emotion's own terms, whatever that might be—but rather look at that, look at it, be present for them. Certainly be present for them, but be present for them in a new way. Maybe step out of the ordinary way of being with them, where we get pulled into their orbit too much.

Respect them, honor them in a sense with attention, but be mindful of what's going on in the following way: What's happening in your body? What are the sensations in your body? What's happening with your breathing? Tune into your breathing in the middle of it.

Not a few people have found that when there are difficult emotions, their breathing is controlled, contracted, tight, fast, shallow, very big. And just to start paying attention to breathing, and how the breathing is, for many—not always, but many times—is settling for people,

is calming, brings us back into some kind of more balanced situation with things. And then it might be significant to feel the body, the whole body.

Because sometimes with intense emotions, the attention becomes selective, and we miss the whole thing. We don't look at the whole thing. We're not here in a way that unifies all of us, all of who we are. But we kind of maybe sometimes get pinpointed on some particular issue around the emotion or the belief or the cause or something.

But to feel your whole body as you have an emotion, to make room for it, also begins changing the landscape, the ecology, of the whole system. And then it says to relax. So that's maybe something useful. And now, feel the sensations, feel the physicality of the emotions. What's happening?

It's a way of being with it without getting involved in the story, for example, and the beliefs about the emotions, or the messages that we think are coming from the emotions. And so, like once I got angry, and the message was, "Punch this guy out." It just happened to be in a Zen meditation hall, sitting *zazen*, sitting meditation in Japan.

The monk sitting next to me really hated me, and he would do things like poke me during *zazen* and do all kinds of unusual things to me. Clearly, he hated me, just because I was, I think, a foreigner. I shouldn't be there. And so then one day, I remember, "I'm going to punch this guy out." That was the message coming from the anger.

It's probably a good idea that I didn't. I just sat there and kept it to myself. So there's the feeling in the body, and then there's the feeling tones. Or maybe before that, there's just remembering you're going to die. That sometimes puts things in a certain context.

You know, some things just vanish in that context that seem so important until you realize, wait a minute, our life is brief. But some things don't. And then there's the feeling tones. Is it pleasant or unpleasant? Is it being felt in the surface mind, surface body, only skin deep, or is it something much deeper?

And what is this deeper? What's the deeper connection to this? Is it mostly the surface mind? If so, what then? Is it mostly the deep mind? If so, what then?

And then to take a good look: is there greed, hatred, and delusion at play? And sometimes there is, and that changes the whole dynamic. To have strong, deep grief and realize that in the grief there is a very strong desire for something—a greed—or maybe there's hatred for something. Kind of wow, that's surprising. I thought it was all an expression of my love.

And so, you know, it creates again a different perspective for the emotion when we start ask-

ing these questions, looking at it this way. And then, what are the other ways? What's the state of mind? Is the mind expansive and broad, or is it not? And with a few emotions, they're not going to be broad and expansive. It might be very tight and contracted.

Is this one of the, I call it, healthy, ultimate states of mind, or is it not a healthy, not an ultimate? And if you're really honest, looking at your state of mind and some of these strong emotions, you might kind of think, "Well, I've had better." But maybe that needs attention. The mind needs attention—not to dismiss it, but to hold it, to be with it, to be seen for what it is.

And then, you know, you have a completely justified emotion, completely a thing that human beings have regularly, and why shouldn't you have that right, like everyone else? Well, is there any hindrances operating? No, it's just pure whatever. Really? Okay. Well, maybe a little bit, maybe a lot.

The emotion is one thing, but the relationship to it might be complicated. Then to see there are no hindrances operating, to see the deeper constructs, ideas that we overlay in the situation, might change the context of it. To see that there is a subtle, or not so subtle, entanglement with something about this whole event. Well, look at that. I didn't know I was entangled. I was knotted up.

So you go through the exercise. It's almost like, you know, occasionally I've suggested to people it'd be a checklist they go through. Just use the *satipaṭṭhāna* just to systematically go through and see what's going on. And by the time you go through that, maybe you've overcome despair, lamentation. Maybe your emotional pain and sadness is no longer there.

It's a different way of approaching it, and maybe it's a wise way to do it indirectly this way. So I don't want to say that the text is ignoring these emotional sides. I would like to say it's really addressing them directly, but from different terms than you think it's supposed to be on. What are the different terms? There's nothing there mentioned about me, myself, and mine.

It's not on the—you're not looking at it as in your own particular biographical self, your idea of who you are. That's not to say now that that's the fifth foundation of mindfulness. Well, if the Buddha had taught in modern America, he would have had to have that fifth one. How could you not? But anyway, it gets complicated, and so it's quite significant.

We're not introducing the whole concept of self and who I am, and what I'm supposed to be, and should be, and want to be, and judgments about the self. And the whole idea of self also doesn't come into play. And the benefit of that, I propose, is that this concept of self,

me, myself, and mine, very quickly gets complicated. Very quickly, it is a maze of so-called mirrors, and you'll never get out.

So it kind of drops that whole self thing and offers a very different way of being here, present. Here's the direct experience. This is the experience, the experience which is not a construct, not a story, not an elaboration. It's not a kind of lumping everything together that's going on into one big lump of despair that you can't see and understand.

It's saying here are the component parts of it, and if you address and meet these component parts, something different begins to shift and happen. Maybe you can even become free. So then we come to the last exercise, and it concerns *dukkha*, suffering. This is a relatively abstract concept. It's a generalization. It's a category word.

Suffering. It's a big word. It encompasses a lot. Some of us collect sufferings, and we have a very big treasure house of suffering that we're keeping for a rainy day. But it's just a general word, and might it be that here's another example where naming specifically what it is makes it more complicated than it needs to be?

Maybe there's something about it at this certain time and place. Should you see the ouch, to see, oh, there's emotional pain here. This is a contraction. This is a very painful, emotionally painful situation. Just to see it at that level, without getting caught up in the stories and the ideas and the specificity of it, the specific aspects of it, might it be that way?

And one of the times where this works, I suggest, is in this process of simplification. The whole *satipaṭṭhāna* can be seen as becoming simpler and simpler. Not to deny things, but for a natural process, step by step, to relax, to settle, to quiet down. And so, at some point, the complicated idea of the suffering is no longer operating.

We can have, some of us—maybe I'll just talk about myself—very sophisticated suffering. You know, I'm, you know, after all, I'm better. I have a Ph.D. And, you know, that shows that I'm intelligent. Thank you. So I'm going to have suffering. I'm going to have first class. I'm going to put it together really well.

And it'll be like the cartoon of *Calvin and Hobbes*. Calvin is building a little snow fort. I guess he's going to have a snowball fight with Hobbes, maybe. So he's building up this fort that just his body fits inside. So he's building the snow around him, and he's inside it while he's building it.

And then he finishes it, and this fort is kind of like just above his head, just the top of his head is showing, and he's stuck. He can't get out. Help! So the very thing that was supposed to protect him was the very thing that caught him, trapped him.

So my sophisticated Ph.D.-level suffering, I'll just make sure it's really smart. But that's not the point. The point is simple. There's a simplification process. How simple can you be, gazing upon your emotional pain?

And part of this whole process is helping that quieting and ability to gaze with clear eyes, calm eyes, calm heart, clear heart, and really see. See how it is physically. See how it affects us in the breathing. See the sensations that are in play. See the feeling tone. See the mind states. See some of these hindrances and things that are operating.

And then, at some point in the simplification process, there's seeing in a very, very simple way the suffering. Finally, get to look at it directly. And it follows that just before that is the equanimity factor of awakening, the *Seven Factors of Awakening*. The whole function is to stabilize and settle and calm the whole system.

So our whole psychophysical system is soft, quiet, balanced, a feeling of harmony, a feeling of being at home in ourselves in a good way, to have kind of a delightful, warmhearted non-reactivity, equanimity. To gaze and see the suffering. And so one of the ways we see in this practice that the unfolding of *satipaṭṭhāna* mindfulness practice is getting to this deep stability, steadiness, quiet, quiet. And partly the deconstruction process leaves us in a very, very simple way.

And there's a beautiful way of gazing upon the world. In one sutta, the Buddha describes the gazing, the looking, the seeing. *Vipassanā* means clear seeing, as the beautiful witness. The beautiful witness. Beautiful here is *kalyāṇa*.

So, the beautiful witnessing, the beautiful gazing. Wow. And now, gazing upon suffering with a quiet, steady, clear mind that's not wandering off, but it's just right here, staying with it, has the ability to gaze kindly, to gaze steadily, deeply, and maybe see suffering in a new way. Not see the suffering through the filter of me, myself, and mine, myself as the victim, or something. Not see through the filter of the cultural, religious, familial conditioning that we've had that makes it more complicated.

Maybe it needs to be to have simplified, purified, clarified the gaze, and simply to look. There's a term, I think, in the world of psychology that adults need to be heard; children need to be seen. And this, the magic, this power of hearing, listening to people, being listened to, without interference, with interest, with allowing—some people benefit tremendously just to be heard well. Children benefit from being seen well.

And here we come to this end of the *satipaṭṭhāna*, which means to see clearly. And maybe something deep inside of us, maybe some of the deepest places we can come to, that's what

it needs. It needs to be seen clearly. See, that's all. It doesn't need to be fixed. It needs to be heard deeply.

So with this simplification process that's going on, what is not happening, though, is we are not clinging to the suffering. We're not reacting to the suffering anymore. We're not living in our projections on the suffering. We're not overlaying our suffering with layers of meaning and purpose and ideas of what it is. We're not having hindrance stories that build more and more kind of complicated stories that trigger the hindrances in relationship to it.

We're not seeing it through the lens of our conditioning, our projections, our preferences. It's a phenomenal thing to be able to see clearly. This is suffering. Wow, this is my suffering. Gaze upon it kindly. Gaze upon it steadily. Gaze upon it with a quiet heart, a warm heart.

This is suffering. There's something about the way that can be seen, that's represented by this expression, "This is suffering," that just—imagine, I want to reach each of you, but maybe there's some way that's very personal. There's some way you can imagine someone who's with you and says, "I see you." In the most caring, loving way, there's no contention, there's no struggle, there's no strife, there's no projection. There isn't anything that is like compassion, or that seems to want too much from you.

It's just they're there. There to say, "I see you. I'm with you." To see your own suffering: "I see you. I'm here with you, just to see you and know you clearly." And this is the whole movement of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Just be quiet enough, still enough, to be able to see past the projections, past the stories, past the ideas that lock things into place, hold them tight in a world of permanence. But to see that even suffering, in the deepest way in which we experience it, is constantly changing and fluxing and moving, and it's part of the river of change of the present moment. Everything's in the river together of change, including our suffering.

And then to see this special moment, or maybe there isn't the suffering for a moment. And we see it appear. It wasn't there for a moment, and we see it appear. And then we see that it disappears. Wait a minute! I thought it was solid. I thought it was continuous.

My whole assumptions about my relationship to it, and how bad this is, and how difficult it is, and what it means for it to be suffering, is built partly on this idea that it's continuous and just stuck. I've had the delusion of permanence around my suffering. I know better, but it doesn't matter. And one part of that delusion of suffering—it's a deep, almost unconscious attitude—is, "It's going to be this way forever. This is it," and that makes the whole thing more difficult.

And so, to not see it through that lens of permanence, but to really see it through the lens of “this is what's arising here right now. This is part of the river.” Ever-moving river of time, ever-moving river of reality, of experience, here and now. And you see that it appears in a quiet mind, and it disappears.

And to see that very, very clearly, and appreciate its disappearing when it's not there, not anticipating for it to come back, not holding on to it so it doesn't go, not staying with the story, what it meant. So you're ready to suffer again because the story is keeping you in that mode. But just seeing it pass, seeing it drop away for a moment, seeing a moment where your mind, your heart is free of that suffering, and to have that moment be long enough, be deep enough, be full enough, be clear enough.

Wow! I thought it was all the time. I thought that I had to fix my problems. I thought I had to solve it. I thought I had to X, Y, and Z. But wow! I just sat here looking at it clearly, and it disappeared. I'm still alive without it, and then it comes back.

But there comes a time where it isn't just even the ordinary coming and going, because you were distracted for a moment, then you went back to your loyalty to the suffering. It just comes and goes, and then something. Wow! Not only wow that it's not there, but wow because something gave away. This time when it passed, when it stopped, something released, something stopped, something gave away, some clinging, some holding.

Wow! It's that this is possible. It's possible to live without suffering, or live without this suffering. It's possible to bring it to an end. And then to understand, this is good. This is the way. This is the way that the suffering can come to an end.

That deeper release that allowed it to go—not that it goes and comes so easily, comes back so easily—but now it can go, and it's almost like as it left, as it ceased, disappeared, it's almost like you released everything in the wake. The place of absence, that kind of place that's empty of suffering—it's almost like you let go into it, like it's a wonderful pool of water you just release yourself into, and it receives you. Or maybe a wonderfully soft bed with a nice comforter, and you just kind of fall backward. You trust it so much, you fall backward into it.

So you release, and you release with it. This is where freedom is. This is possible. So the way that this is worded in the text says—and usually this is described as the *Four Noble Truths*—but it says:

One understands, “This is suffering.” Just that, very simple. “This is suffering.” One understands, “This is the arising of suffering.” There it is. And one understands, “This is the ceasing of suffering,” the cessation of suffering.

It's not the ordinary passing away, but it passes away, and there's something that ceases, that releases, that stops. Wow! And then one has confidence. Oh, this is how it's done. This is how this freedom happens. This ability to gaze and see in this kind of way.

To be attuned, to be attuned to that place where there is no clinging, no holding on. And when that experience of cessation is strong enough, there can remain for a person a reference point, kind of maybe almost like it's ever-present if you look for it, a reference for what it's like, or what the sense is, the feeling is, to not cling to anything. You might still be clinging, but there's still this: “Oh, I know. Non-clinging is right here. It's a possibility.” To not cling, not hold on, not grab. To live free of that.

I know it now. I feel it now. It's close by. I experienced it so fully, and it becomes a reference point. This is the way. Non-clinging is the way. Releasing is the way. Seeing it all clearly is the way.

The unifying way of bringing everything, all this together—body, feeling, tones, mind, the mind processes—bring them together into this quiet, peaceful, clear seeing. It's easier to talk about than it is to do it, but this is how the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* ends. And this end, with this kind of deep insight that I call the four liberating insights, this is what overcomes despair and lamentation. That brings about the disappearance of emotional pain and sadness, at least to the degree to which those emotions arise because of clinging and grasping.

So the last exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is the sense object and the sense that recognizes it, seeing and the sight object, and the entanglement, the grabbing, the clinging that happens between them, the knot. And if that is seen clearly enough, it releases, it gives way, it ceases. But to support that, there is the *Seven Factors of Awakening*. And one of the reasons these *Seven Factors of Awakening*, one of their uses, is that in ordinary life, letting go deeply is frightening.

It can feel dangerous and disorienting to let go. For some people, letting go is bad news. But when your whole system is being informed and guided and filled with the seven factors of awakening, letting go is not unwelcome. Letting go just feels like it's more of the same. This is home. Yes, we can let go.

Of course, we want to let go because the clinging takes us away. And by this time, you've seen

how good it is all along the way, this process of simplification, letting go in small ways, small ways. And we trust that process, deep trusting this is good. And this final release, letting go, ceasing, that the four liberating insights point to, is not something you can do.

But what you do is be able to gaze peacefully, clearly, maybe kindly, without agenda. Without judging, without reactivity, simply to gaze. And if the simple gazing upon life this way does not lead to a deep release, it doesn't matter, because it's so good just to look at the world this way.

Many of you have probably carried the same perspective, the same idea of self, the same understanding of the problems for a long, long time, and maybe they haven't worked that well. And the offering of the *satipaṭṭhāna* is to use a different perspective, a new perspective. That might offer you a different way forward than your old perspectives. May it be on these days that we have here that you take the chance to see deeply in this new perspective that's been offered us on this retreat so far. Thank you.