

What is 'Insight'?

New Year Retreat

Rob Burbea

December 29, 2007

<https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/11972/>

This talk presents a map and overview of the path of Insight Meditation, exploring the different kinds and levels of insight available to us, the possible avenues for its development and deepening, and some of the many ways we can nurture and strengthen its unfolding.

So the theme I would like to explore this evening is insight. Just to go into what that means. What is insight? What does that mean when we talk about insight, when we talk about insight meditation? Very much what I want to do in this talk is give an overview, very much of an overview, so big, big picture. I want to offer some of the avenues of possibility for how insight deepens, and what that process is, can be – some of the possibilities. And to really give, what I want to do is to give a conceptual framework. So it's very much about just kind of putting things in place.

Right from the start, I'm aware that there are, you could say, different personality types, in terms of how people learn. And so for some people, having an overview, having a conceptual framework of how things fit together, and kind of what goes where, and how it all works together, they feel inside themselves that that's really necessary, and without that, they feel just totally disoriented on the path. Other people, other personality types or learning types, whatever, are actually confused when you start talking about an overview. So it's a tricky situation. [laughs] But this talk is an overview talk. And so I hope you can bear with that, if it's not your style.

I also want to cover a lot of territory tonight, so got about an hour. [laughs] Just go right from kind of the beginnings of the path, the most basic sort of ideas of the path, right all the way to the end, to the final kind of insights. And that, too, I'm also aware, again, of personality types here, and just how people respond to that. But please, do use this talk to get your bearings, in a sense, and have a sense of where you're navigating. But I'm well aware that some of what I talk about towards the end of the talk will be, as I said, about the sort of deep end of the path, and as such, will be not yet in the realm of probably most people's experience in this room. It is in the realm of some people's experience; I know that. And just, what does the mind do when it hears that kind of stuff? Do we feel inspired? Do we feel daunted? Does the measuring, comparing mind come up? "Oh god, I'll never get there. I'm hopeless. I can't *da-da-da-da-da*." And we compare where we feel we are to whatever we're hearing about. So just to, as I'm talking tonight, just to please be aware of how you're listening, what you're bringing to the listening.

Okay. Insight – this word, 'insight': very, very general kind of definition we could give is, what is insight? Any seeing or understanding that brings the dissolution or the dissolving or a decrease in suffering, in dissatisfaction, in dis-ease, in what we call *dukkha*. So any seeing or understanding that brings just an ease, some easing or completely dissolving of *dukkha* – that's what we call insight. Now, that can happen intellectually, but if it's just an intellectual understanding, and it doesn't lead to this easing, this lessening of the suffering, it doesn't actually count or qualify as an insight. So that applies – this "What is an insight?," that which brings the lessening of suffering – it applies to any situation, and

any experience whatsoever. Any situation, any experience, you can apply insight to, insight is relevant. And the range is extreme – on one level, we could say, from the most mundane sort of everyday insights that don't even feel like they have a lot to do with meditation or whatever, to the most subtle, and the most profound and – whatever you want to say – transcendent.

So an example of something that we could call more mundane or whatever, but very, very important, would be, I notice, you notice, we notice that when I have a difficulty with someone else, in relationship, whether I know that person or not, when I talk to them and express the difficulty I'm having, and I talk in an accusing way – “You *da-da-da-da-da*,” and I tell that person how they are, usually there's an increase in suffering. Doesn't usually help. Occasionally it might, but usually it doesn't help to talk to a person that way. So just pulling any old basic example out of the hat. The insight there is, “Okay, if I want to actually address this and bring about a calming of the suffering in the situation, well, I need to not talk accusingly. I need to just refrain from trying to tell a person how they are.” Just very, very basic, very, very simple – turns out to be quite difficult for a lot of us. But still, it's there. [5:52]

One of my teachers had a way of kind of conceptualizing of insight, and talked about a possible way of looking at it. Three kinds of insights: **(1) the personal, (2) the universal, and (3) the ultimate.** There are three kinds, and in a way, they're separate. In a way, they're not so separate.

(1) What does personal insight mean? What does it mean to have insight on a personal level? This means knowing, inquiring into and knowing one's own particular patterns and tendencies and habits of body, of speech, of mind. And again, this could be anything. So I have a friend, and in the context of her relationship, actually, with her husband, she notices – and this, I think she said this has been going on quite a while – that when her husband expresses a need, just a simple need like, “Oh, I'd like a cup of tea as well,” or whatever, sometimes she doesn't even hear it. [laughter] It's not actually as big a problem as that might sound. It's just a little kind of niggle in their relationship. So they're both practitioners, and quite – to see that, to know that, is insight. There's this particular pattern. There's this particular tendency. And then, just to know that. So okay, that's an insight into, in this case, a personal situation.

Or one might see, “In a situation of disagreement with another, my tendency is always to assume that I'm wrong and the other person is right, that I don't know. Or often to assume that.” Or the other way around: “To assume I'm always right. I always know what's best. And they're always wrong. People don't see as clearly as I do.” So all kinds of examples possible here. But the general thrust to really be alive in our inquiry into our personal tendencies, habits, our personal kind of make-up. Not with any judgment. It's not about judging. It's just about, going back to the beginning, what I said, insight is about what frees us from *dukkha*, frees us from dissatisfaction, what helps – basically, what helps.

So this personal insight also includes: what are my particular weaknesses? What are my particular strengths? Now, this is an interesting one, because oftentimes, for many of us, we're more aware of our weaknesses than our strengths: “Oh, I can't do that. I haven't got that together.” And then we hear teachings or whatever about loving-kindness, and mindfulness, and calmness, and we think, “Well, I haven't got that, I haven't got that, I haven't got.” And we're aware of the things that we don't have, our weaknesses. But are we also aware of our strengths? This is quite some, you could say, some

psychological maturity, to just know, “What do I need to work on? And what’s actually pretty good with me?”

So again, many examples here. A person could be – and I’m not saying they have to be one or the other here – but a person could have a lot of access to their emotional lives. They know what they’re feeling. They’re in touch with that. They’re able to express that. They feel the fullness, the beauty, the richness of that. And I’m not saying it follows from that at all, but they could have a particular weakness of, say, while that’s there with the emotional life, not being so clear in situations – being, maybe, *too* led by their emotions. (I’m really not saying those two go together.) Or the other way around: a person can be very clear, very analytical, and actually not have so much access to the depth and the richness of the life of the emotions. Just to know: what’s the weakness, what’s the strength, what needs some work? What’s a strength? Do we know, do we acknowledge and appreciate our strengths? Really, really important. [10:01]

So this, the realm of personal insight, insight into our personhood, our personality, so to speak, also includes the whole realm of our story – so the story that we tell ourselves, the stories that we tell ourselves and others about ourselves, about our life, about our journey. So this is a very, very significant area. It can be – and I’m sure you know, just hearing stories, or mythological stories, how beautiful stories can be, how touching, how opening, how, actually, revealing of insight they can be. Stories can be very, very beautiful. They can be helpful, absolutely they can be helpful. And they can be unhelpful. And so this inquiry, this insight, this inquiry into our own story needs to ask this question: the stories that I’m telling myself about myself, about my life – are they helpful, or are they unhelpful? Is it helpful, or is it unhelpful?

It may well be that telling myself a certain story of my upbringing, of my childhood, of my journey, that through the telling of that story, I actually embrace aspects of myself, I open to aspects of myself that I otherwise might shut out. And the story’s helping to open that. It’s healing. It’s reclaiming something. But it can also be, or it can be at a later time, that we get stuck in a story, stuck in telling ourselves a narrative or something about how we are, about where we’ve come from, etc. We get stuck and over-identified with that. This is a very difficult area, not easy to kind of navigate this and balance this and inquire into this. It’s something that’s actually, I think, important for all of us. I don’t think anyone is exempt from this, this inquiry. Is the story helpful? And if so, how? And is it not helpful? And if so, how? And is it possible to actually tell myself a different story, to rewrite my story? And actually, yes, that is possible.

Any story we have of ourselves can never, even if it’s very beautiful, even if it’s very compelling, even if it seems completely obvious, it can never be the whole truth. There’s no way. Truth as such is bigger than anything you can fit it into. A story, helpful as it might be, can never be the whole truth. And there comes a time, in a way – not that we get rid of a story, necessarily, but in a way, we know a freedom from our story, as well as being able to pick it up.

Okay. As I said, I’m moving a lot of territory here, and you can just kind of sit back, and just hear about all this, really – the realm of personal insight.

(2) The realm of **universal insights**. What these are are, rather than things that are particularly true for me (my tendencies, my patterns, etc.), these are universally true, true for all things and all beings.

So the most obvious example would be impermanence. It's just true for everyone and all things. It's a universal reality, we could say.

This is interesting. I'm going to talk more about universal truths, but the realm of personal truths and universal truths, together, inquiring into that, deepening our insight into those whole realms of personal and universal truths, personal and universal insights – what that brings, what that can bring, what it should bring is that we are more and more, very gradually, very non-linearly, more and more able to be with, to open to, to respond skilfully, and to care for the world of our body, to care, to respond for our body, to know our body, the world of our feelings, the world of our mind, the world of our relationships. What is it to respond well and to care in the realm of relationships? Body, feeling, mind, relationships, the realm of our work, etc. All that, personal and universal truths, part of that function is to help us be able to relate well, to be with well, to respond well to all that realm – what we could call the realm of relative truth, conventional reality, this world that it seems very obvious that we live in. I'm going to come back to that. And this really, really, really is a function of insight. Really, really, very much obviously a possibility of insight.

(3) And then the third one, **ultimate truth**, and this refers to something that's actually beyond concepts, can't even pin it down with words, something totally beyond, that the Buddha said that's ultimately liberating. The level of liberation, of freeing, that comes out of that transcends any of the other insights.

Question, question: am I, are we, in our life, giving equal attention to so-called working with the relative and so-called opening to the ultimate? Are they equal for us? Do we actually give equal attention, equal care of inquiry into that? I think this is very interesting. And you get – moving around in different spiritual circles over decades, one sees tendencies in different spiritual circles. So there are some where the emphasis is very much towards ultimate truth, and all kinds of problems in the relative, and dealing with relationships, and body, and feelings. Other circles where it's almost exclusively concerned with the relative, and kind of putting that, getting that right, healing that, putting it into place, getting it just so, so that we can be okay with it, getting our relationship with the relative world okay, less problematic. Just a question about that: where am I with that?

A bit more about these universal insights: another whole area of universal insight is something like, "It's a good idea to meditate." Very, very simple, and probably no one would be here if they at least didn't somewhat believe that. That's actually an insight. There's something there, as simple as it sounds, and sort of basic as it sounds: "It's a good idea to meditate. It's a good idea to practise." Again, seeing that, understanding that leads towards the dissolution of suffering.

It's a good idea to take care of how we are with each other ethically, as Jake was talking very beautifully in the opening talk, to really care about that. It's a really, really good idea. This is an insight, to really care what I put out into the world, the vibrations that I'm putting out there, what's reverberating in my wake. It's a good idea – we could put anything like that – to practise generosity. That's an interesting one. We sort of know it, but it's also like, do we really know that that's where happiness is? Do we really know what a good idea that is? The Buddha's famous quote: "If you knew what I know about generosity, you wouldn't let a single meal go by without giving something to someone." Yet we don't actually know that fully. The insight hasn't sunk deeply for most of us yet.

It's a good idea to meditate. It's a good idea to take care of our ethics. Generosity, it's a good idea. Kindness is a good idea. It's a beautiful idea. All that is in the realm of insight. So what that means is, what is it, what qualities, what actions do I need to put into place, that lead to happiness, that lead to well-being? What actions/qualities do I cultivate that actually lead to suffering? Disinterest in the care of ethics, non-practising of generosity – actually not that helpful. So these are, all of that, in the realm of universal insights, they're not one-off insights. They're not, in other words, we see it once, and then, "Well, that's that. Done." We need to see this over and over and over and over and over, until finally the coin drops, and seeing it over and over, and practising it, it deepens. The insight deepens, and it becomes unshakeable.

How common is it for a person, a human being, to have unshakeable knowing, understanding, faith in, let's say, the power of generosity? So much so that that becomes something that they live by, above self-concern? Actually it's pretty rare, as far as I can see. But the potential there is, through the repeating of the insight, seeing it over and over, it descends to become unshakeable. Something like the importance of meditation practice, for many people, that's unshakeable. It's got to the point, through repetition, through seeing it over and over, through all the ups and downs, where it's an unshakeable insight.

We can talk, in the process of the path, as we walk the path, wherever we are on the path, wherever we are, we can talk about insights arising. We say, "I *had* an insight," or "I *got* an insight. I *got* something." And so, one very common approach to the path is just to cultivate the mindfulness, just to be steady in one's attention to, one's presence to the present moment, and just trust that mindfulness. And of course the mind goes, and we bring it back, and it goes, and we bring it back. Something can potentially happen through just devoting oneself to mindfulness, to presence, to being here fully. And in the climate of that mindfulness, even if it doesn't feel like great mindfulness, perfect mindfulness – whatever that is – even if it doesn't feel like that, "Oh! Some insight." Again, over the whole range, could be very, very simple, to do with anything, mundane, whatever. So insight arises.

More traditionally, the Buddha talks about taking care of the foundation for insight through taking care of our ethics, and taking care of our calmness, deepening in our calmness and our collectedness of mind, our *samādhi*. Those two – the ethics and the *samādhi* – give rise. It's like they're the perfect soil, and insights arise.

So there's, we can say, insights *arising*, and then another mode, which is what I would call *using* insights or *consolidating* insights. I'll try and explain what I mean by this. Sometimes in our practice, whether on retreat or off retreat, we see something. Could be anything. I see the importance to imbue my communications with kindness. I see the importance of letting go of judgmentalism, whatever it is. We see that, and it feels really clear. Or we see impermanence, and it feels really clear: "I see it. Everything's changing." And we see it crystal clear: "Aha!" Sometimes, it's done there. It's finished, done, that's it, you can retire that insight and just live off its interest in the inner bank. Usually, though, it takes some acting on. You actually need to consolidate it.

So we have this great clarity, whether it's on retreat or whatever it is. I see the importance of being more kind to myself – whatever it is. And then, a little time goes by, and that insight fades. We lose touch with that perception. We feel like we're back where we were. Very important: to consolidate, to deepen the insight, actually needs, very often, us to *act* on it. So even when the sense of it, the

perception has changed, one asks oneself, “I don’t feel it right now. But I remember having that insight. What if I acted now? What if I chose now in my life as if I knew that was true, because I know what I saw there was more true than all this, whatever seems real now? I know that what I saw about the importance of love or impermanence or whatever it is – I know that was true. I don’t feel it now. What if I took a risk and just acted on faith, made a choice, made choices that lived out that insight?” In other words, how we are with people and things, with ourselves, etc.

Very often, we have an insight, but it actually leaves us kind of sitting on a fence. And we can flop back down into the familiar, and the known, and the momentum of our habits from the past, or we can just nudge ourselves and flop down into the new, into a life lived from the place of that insight. That may look dramatically different. It may look dramatically different. What if one had really deep insight into, say, the power of love, the importance of love, the importance of generosity, and then just said, “Right, I’m really going to live that out”? It could be something very, very undramatic. Insight is a bit like a muscle. If we don’t use it, it will atrophy. It will atrophy and fade. [26:27] We need to kind of keep it alive, to consolidate it.

So there’s this, as I said, insight arising, just arising out of mindfulness. And there’s also this acting on, using and consolidating. But there’s another way that we can use and consolidate an insight. And that’s, rather, using insight as a kind of mode of seeing. Remember, what I’m doing tonight is I’m just creating conceptual frameworks. I’m hoping this is helpful. A mode of seeing. I’ll explain what I mean by that. What would it be – say, impermanence – to, rather than just wait for a sense of impermanence and the ricochets of that, the reverberations of that, what would it be to actually look at one’s experience, just being interested in impermanence? Put that on as a lens, a way of seeing, as a practice. So this is moving beyond what we might call simple mindfulness or simple presence or being, and actually deliberately taking up a certain mode of seeing, a certain way of looking at experience, for a period of time – a sitting, or half a sitting, or a day, or you know, a retreat, or whatever it is, or a year.

I’ll talk more about this, but we can talk then about insight as a kind of result, just sitting, being here, and just present, and just open, and there pops the insight. Can talk about insight as a result. And we can talk about insight as – I can’t really find the words – a process of using insight. I’ll go into it a bit more. But both of these are important. And again, it’s interesting, just in the realm of maybe personality differences, etc., where we tend to go with that. So some people always want to just *be*, and just let things arise, and some people are always kind of probing and trying to look differently, or a tendency either way. Both are important, and I would say, maybe not just one way. Maybe not just one way.

But with this ‘modes of seeing’ – and I’m going to go, as I said, more into it right now – we can think, if you hear about that, “Okay, putting on a different lens. I’m looking at things through the lens of, say, impermanence, or whatever.” We can think, “Well, I’m not really, I haven’t really got my mindfulness together, can’t really stay with the breath. I’m not really together enough, got all these emotions going on, not ready for that.” Or, “I just want to be. I just want to be.” And these are two quite common reactions to hearing about this possibility. But actually, looking at things through certain modes of seeing as insight actually calms the being. It helps emotionally. It helps bring some calmness and collectedness to the mind. So it’s not just that we need to stay with the breath or whatever until we feel suitably calm.

Okay, so a bit more about this. Ways, modes of seeing, ways of looking – what do I mean by this? One of the sort of most fundamental ways the Buddha framed his teaching was in terms of the Four Noble Truths, which I'm sure many of you have heard. There is *dukkha*, there is suffering, dis-ease, dissatisfaction. There is *dukkha*. There are the causes and conditions of *dukkha*. There is the possibility for the ending, for the cessation of *dukkha*, of dis-ease, of dissatisfaction. It's possible for that to end. And there is the path leading to it. So in a way, that's a summary of the whole path. But you could also pick it up as a kind of shorthand, shorthand version of the Four Noble Truths.

What that means is, whenever there is any dissatisfaction at all, any dis-ease, any discomfort, any *dukkha*, basically, any suffering, any at all, can ask oneself a question: how am I contributing to this suffering? How am I perhaps even sustaining it? At first that might sound like an odd question, because some sufferings that we're in, "This has nothing to do with me. I'm an innocent victim of this illness, of this situation, of this political situation, whatever it is." And it's not to ignore the importance of all that. But it's a safe assumption that, until we're completely awakened, whenever there is *dukkha*, whenever there's even the subtlest dis-ease, discomfort, that the unawakened mind does something or some things to add to it unnecessarily. It's actually compounding *dukkha*, compounding dissatisfaction.

Again, whole range of examples, but one is something like grumbling. So we're in a situation, we're annoyed with someone or something. Dharmically speaking, we have two options, really. One is, can I find a way of working with this that actually I let go? The situation remains, and I just let go. I've let go inside. Or, can I do something to address the situation? Can I bring a wisdom, a skilfulness of communication, a care of communication to this person that I'm upset with? And can I solve the situation that way, or do something, make some changes in the world that are skilful and appropriate? So either I let go or I do something. Unfortunately, oftentimes, we find ourselves just, neither this nor that, and just sitting there grumbling to people who are sort of willing to hear. Grumbling is not helpful. It's actually leading to more suffering. It's a very obvious example, in a way, and a crass example, but it's important to see this. What am I doing that's actually compounding suffering, adding a layer of unnecessary suffering there?

Again, the story that I'm telling myself about the situation, about myself, whatever, is that increasing the suffering in some way? Is that increasing the sense of dissatisfaction? The way I'm seeing it, the way I'm reacting to it – if I have a headache, a knee ache, and I react to it with aversion, I react to it with, "I just want to get rid of it," pushing it away, am I increasing the suffering? Yes.

Now, sometimes, as I'm sure you'll recognize as I've just said that, sometimes we know we're doing this stuff. We actually know. We know that we're grumbling and it's not helping. It's not *that* deep an insight. But somehow we just keep doing it. This is the interesting thing about insight. What is it that's going to make the change? There's no judgment in this question, because as I said, until one is completely awakened, you can pretty much safely assume that the mind will be adding something to a situation that feels difficult, adding some unnecessary suffering to it – guaranteed. Some of it is going to be pretty gross and fairly easy to uncover. Others, it's extremely subtle – so to the most subtle kind of intentions and conceptions, delusions of awareness.

Okay. So this modes of seeing – one is, how am I adding to the suffering? How am I perhaps contributing to it, sustaining it? Without judgment – it's just what consciousness does, actually. The Buddha talked about three modes of seeing in particular that we can practise deliberately. And they're

called the three characteristics. They are: impermanence, *dukkha*/unsatisfactoriness, and what's called *anattā*, not-self. I'll just say a little bit about these.

(1) Impermanence, the first one, I don't know if you would agree, but I would say that to most human beings over the age of – what, I don't know, four, or five? I'm not sure – impermanence is actually pretty obvious. It's a pretty obvious fact of our life. Remember, if we're interested in insight, it's got to make a difference. It's got to make a difference to how we relate and how we live. So yes, impermanence is obvious. But are we seeing it in a way that makes a difference? Using this mode of seeing – actually just coming out of that very lovely mode of just being mindful. I maybe skipped over that too quickly. Something very beautiful, very precious, and extremely important about just giving attention, just coming back, just being here, just being mindful, devoting oneself to that. A real preciousness and beauty in that way of being, way of practising, and trusting that out of that, the insights will come. I really want to stress that.

But what would it be if we picked up impermanence, instead of waiting for the insight into impermanence – “Aha! I've been mindful, and now I notice things are impermanent”? What would it be to actually take up impermanence as a lens, so that one's being mindful, but all I'm interested in is noticing impermanence? All I care about in this sitting, in this day, in this next three months, all I care about is noticing impermanence. Can be very powerful. [37:29]

Impermanence – there are many ways of working with it, so oftentimes, what gets stressed is very, very microscopic noticing of impermanence, moment to moment to moment, just seeing change, change, change, very, very fast. Or one can just go through one's day. And you can do that here, so there's an invitation: what would it be to get up tomorrow morning, and just say, “This day, I'm really going to focus in on change”? You take up – the Buddha's words – you take up your theme. And one sees the change in the visual forms. Look: visual form, changing. It's just changing. All through the day, changing visual form, all through the day, changing emotional climate, all through the day. Do I go to bed in the same mood as I got up? Has it stayed the same all day? All through the day, changing body sensations, changing sounds. Right now, the sounds are changing. Just going through and just focusing on impermanence so that the fact of impermanence begins to impress itself deeply, deeply on the consciousness. And we begin more and more to be able to live that way. [38:38]

If you try this – again, it's an invitation – at some point in your path, if you try this, you will see that contemplating that way should bring a letting go, should bring an ease, should bring a sense of freedom and joy. If we contemplate impermanence in the right way, it brings joy. So you're actually using it in the moment as a way of feeling into freedom, of opening up into freedom. It's a way of seeing, a way of looking.

And of course, there's the reflection on death. All this, all this now is in the context of our death. We are born at a certain date. We die at a certain date. Can we see this moment in that context? Doesn't have to be morbid. Can actually liberate a lot of freedom, a lot of joy, a lot of love.

So sometimes, and particularly with the impermanence contemplation, you read in the commentaries – not actually originally what the Buddha said, but you read in the commentaries that if one contemplates impermanence, one will start getting really freaked out, and really upset, and really agitated, and disgusted with life, and horrified, and very afraid, etc. I don't think that's how insight works. I think, going back to right what I said at the beginning, the mark of insight is that it brings a

sense of freedom. It brings of sense of joy. So I'm talking about modes of seeing that we can pick up and use, that lead to a sense of freedom. [40:18] If they lead to a sense of agitation or confusion existentially, or all the rest of it, torment – wrong! Put it away! Do something else. So if we contemplate impermanence, to ask oneself: am I contemplating it in a way that's actually helpful, that's leading to freedom, to that sense? Okay, so there's impermanence. There's the first characteristic, the first mode of seeing.

(2) The second one is what's called ***dukkha***, this unsatisfactoriness of things. All this can sound very depressing. Again, really, really want to stress: they lead to freedom. If we pick them up, if we use them in the right way, they lead to joy, peace, freedom, etc. If things are impermanent, if things are always changing, they cannot give us lasting satisfaction. And so one can, again, put on a mode of seeing for a sitting, a day, a month, a year. What if I saw everything as unsatisfactory? Just things come into consciousness, any experience, anything at all – just regard it as unsatisfactory. It's not a loathing or an aversion. Just saying, "Ah! It can't satisfy me." What happens is there's a letting go. There's a letting go. So I said, moving through a lot of territory here.

Another aspect of this *dukkha* insight or mode of seeing is actually learning – and we'll probably talk about this tomorrow morning – learning to uncouple, to relax the aversion or the grasping that we have to our experience, and to things that come up. So typically, something comes up, and it's pleasant, and we grab on. We grasp. We hold on. We want to keep it. Something comes up that's unpleasant, and we push it away. We're averse to it. One can become more and more sensitive to that movement of pushing away and hanging on, and learn how to relax it, learn how to let go. [42:27] That's very much a practice. All this is practice. So as I said, I'm outlining some possibilities for practice over the very long term.

One can practise letting go. And one will see that if I let go of the push and the pull, less suffering in the experience, guaranteed. If I let go of the push and pull, there's less suffering. One notices the suffering, the problem, go out of experience. And again, we can use that. We can consolidate that. Just take that, put that on as a lens, as a way of relating to experience in a moment, in a sitting, in a walking, whatever it is, and just use it, and use it, and deepen it, consolidate it. See the insight: the suffering comes from the relationship, the push, the pull. It's not in the object itself. It's not in the experience itself.

(3) Third one is this **not-self**. So I'm really not going to go into this in a big way, but just to say, that's also a mode of seeing. And with practice, there's the possibility: instead of identifying with everything that comes up, identify with my body sensations, identify with my emotions, "They're me," or "They're mine," identify with my thoughts, "They're me," or "They're mine," one learns to practise letting go, letting go of identification, regarding things as not-self. Again, it's a lens that one puts on, this not-self. It's not me, not mine. And in that, there's a letting go, a very beautiful letting go. It's not at all about disconnection, or dissociation, or numbing out, or anything like that. It's practising a mode of seeing, a certain lens. Everything that comes up, can we practise with that way?

Earlier today, I feel like I'm also getting ill in some manner. And there was a headache, and I was sitting. And this goes back to this push and pull thing. I just want to drop this in there as a little titbit. What happens – the headache comes up. Natural, or you could say, normal reaction of consciousness is to want to push it away. Want to get rid of this headache, quite intense, unpleasant. I've seen this

before, but found that if I work with just relaxing the pushing away, just opening, just allowing, relaxing the aversion, love came. Love came. The aversion was actually blocking a sense of *mettā*, of loving-kindness, of warmth, of openness. So again, one could take that up, and use that as a way to practise *mettā*. I just sit here, and I just let go of aversion, and the heart – again, you can see this; you can experiment with this in your practice, over the years, really – lets go of aversion, and the warmth comes. The heart opens. More love comes. [50:00] So all these three characteristics, we see, if we practise them as modes of seeing, they absolutely lead to a sense of less suffering. The suffering just drains out. That's really, really important to see, to see the skilfulness of seeing that way, to develop the skill of seeing that way.

But something else happens. It's actually quite significant, as we go now, talking about the sort of very deep end of the path – as I said, just to give you a sense, an overview. If one keeps practising with these modes of seeing, letting go, letting go of the push and pull, letting go, seeing impermanence over and over, regarding things as not-self. The suffering goes, but experience itself begins to fade a little bit, or a lot. To the degree that we let go, experience fades.

So let's backtrack a little bit. When we talk about mindfulness, we often talk about: is it possible to be with something, as I said, I think the first morning, just in a very bare way, just really meet the experience as it is, and not overlay it with a whole bunch ... [audio cut out for about twenty seconds] Just doing that, just being present, just being mindful, letting go of *papañca*, letting go of this proliferation, this tendency to sort of get over-entangled and blow things up. The more we can just meet things with a very, very simple, basic, beautiful mindfulness, just there, what we find – and this is a very common experience, as many of you will know, and others will probably discover as the days go by – what we find is, our experience begins to brighten. So, literally, people say, "The grass seems more green. The sky seems more blue. I'm just hearing more clearly. I'm seeing more clearly." There's a kind of radiance that begins to come into one's experience, the more that we're able to meet it in a very direct, very simple, bare way – mindfulness and bare attention.

And it can be that through that, we keep deepening that mindfulness, we're actually letting go of anything else, and there's just this sense of this moment, and the beauty, the exquisite beauty of this moment – just the now. And it can even seem to be sparkling. Like the sense of now, the sense of sparkling there. It's a very lovely aspect of the path that's available to us. It has a real intimacy with experience, an intimacy with life. That's very much a fruit of this simple mindfulness, and letting go of *papañca*, letting go of proliferation, of story and all that.

But it can be, then, that we feel like this moment and that radiance, immanence of things, is the reality, is the absolute truth of things, the only real thing. We hear this word suchness, and it's come to actually mean something which it didn't originally mean: "Suchness is just the way it exactly is in this moment, without my layers of *papañca* and preconception" – that's not actually what it quite means. So there's something very, very beautiful here, and just coming very simply, very directly, very nakedly with the mindfulness. Beautiful, beautiful aspect of being mindful. [49:53]

But don't stop there. Don't stop there. If we keep letting go – and I'm talking about the deep end of the path there – if we keep letting go, keep learning to let go through these ways of seeing that I'm talking about, we find that here, I was just being there, and the experience was getting more and more bright, more and more there, more and more present, more and more radiant. But if I keep letting go, it

actually begins to fade. Experience itself begins to blur and dissolve and fade and become less prominent in consciousness. Something very, very interesting happening here!

The Buddha once said to practitioners, “Be someone who tears down the aggregates” – so the aggregates means the body, the emotions, the mind, consciousness, the feeling life, thoughts, etc. Be someone who tears that all down. That sounds really destructive. What does it mean to tear that down, to be someone who tears that down? Exact words: tear it down. But if we do that, if we follow this way, this mode of seeing, eventually, all that, all that in the realm of experience begins to, in a way, fade, more and more and more, to the degree that we’re able to let go in these ways. And we move, you could say, on one level, we move towards knowing what is Unfabricated, Unborn. The Buddha says – beautiful quote: “Where all phenomena cease” – there’s this complete fading; where all phenomena cease – “all ways of speaking cease.”¹ Where all phenomena cease, when there’s been this complete fading, all ways of speaking cease.

This is – and I’m talking about the very, very deep end of the path – this is an interesting one. How does the heart respond to that? Oftentimes our sense of practice and life is very much, of course, to do with *all this*. What would it be to tear that down? How does that sound? It goes beyond our sense of actually what life is. So we could spend a whole Dharma talk on that one. I’m not going to.

The Buddha says, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which is one of the discourses that this practice, insight meditation, is most based on, there’s a refrain that keeps coming back, and he says: “Focus on arising and passing away with regard to phenomena, seeing: ‘Such is body, such is form, such is feeling, such is perception, such is mental formations, such is consciousness. Such is its origination, and such is its dissolution.’”² So, strange language. What it really means is, see *how* it comes up and *how* it fades. It’s not pointing to only noticing that it’s impermanent. As I said, actually that’s fairly obvious on one level. It’s pointing to seeing this: the more I cling in any way, the more prominent experience is in consciousness. I begin to understand *how* things arise and *how* they fade. He said that if you follow that line of inquiry, that line of insight, it leads to complete liberation. [53:31]

So what one sees is that the more entanglement, the more the push and pull, the more the fighting with experience, the more prominent that experience is. You can see this when there’s a lot of story, a lot of entanglement, how big that thing seems in consciousness, whatever it is. Let go a little bit, a little bit, a little bit, and the thing fades. For example, a pain in the knee, you can see it. Or letting go of suffering: letting go of identification actually leads to a fading of the experience. The more that’s there, the more clinging is there, the more the experience is there. Less it’s there, less the experience is there. This is completely counterintuitive, totally and utterly counterintuitive. We tend to believe in a world that’s out there, that exists independent of how I relate to it and look at it.

One could ask – okay, so I see, the more I push and pull, the more entangled I am, the more prominent the world appears. The less, the less. And as it gets less and less, less and less prominent the world appears. And when there’s no pushing/pulling at all, no experience arises. And one might ask, “Well, which amount of pushing and pulling reveals the real way the world is?” Can’t actually find it. The Buddha said the nature of things is that they dependently arise. So we can develop – as I said at the beginning – avenues, avenues of possibility on the path. One is to develop these modes of seeing. They actually develop from those three characteristics into other ones. And you can pick them up and just go further, go deeper. And it’s all available for us.

One eventually – if we talk about what’s sort of the final insight, so to speak, one sees more and more that all things, including awareness, consciousness, or mind, or whatever you want to call it, including things like space and like time, absolutely everything that we take for granted, is actually built and fabricated by my relationship to it, by the way I’m looking at it. Not to understand that, the Buddha called that the fundamental delusion, the fundamental ignorance that human beings have, or that consciousnesses have. So he’s talking about something – I’m aware that as I’m saying it, it might sound, well, perplexing, but also kind of not that significant. The Buddha said this is actually *the* most significant thing in the Dharma.

There was a seeker called Kaccāyana. And he approached the Buddha one time, and he said, “What is this delusion? And what’s the right way of seeing things?” And the Buddha said ordinary beings – in other words, unawakened beings – think dualistically. They conceive in terms of dualisms. They conceive that their self and the things around their self either exist or don’t exist. They say “it is” or “it is not.” They think dualistically in terms of “it is” and “it is not.” So things and situations are really real, or really not real. Because of that, there’s clinging. Because of that fundamental delusion, there’s clinging, and then there’s suffering. It’s out of that that there’s suffering, and the whole realm of disease, dissatisfaction, the whole realm of what’s called *samsāra*. But he said, for those with insight into *how* – stressing that word *how* – phenomena arise, to *how* they sustain, and to *how* they cease (that is, this dependent arising I’m talking about), there is no “is,” and there is no “is not.” He said – a quote from the Buddha: “That things exist, O Kaccāyana, is one extreme. That they do not exist is another. But I accept neither ‘is’ nor ‘is not,’ and I declare the truth from the middle position.”³

So I’m not sure how that sounds. It probably sounds very different ways to different people. It’s really, really, really not nihilistic. So it can be easy to hear that teaching and feel it’s very destructive, very nihilistic. It’s really not. The deeper we go into this – and it’s a very gradual thing, it’s a very gradual process – the deeper we go into it, the more freedom is liberated, the more joy, the more peace, the more love and compassion are liberated. And even that is actually a real possibility for us. It’s totally a real possibility for us on this path. It’s the promise of this path that it can deliver.

Okay. That’s it. [laughs] So going back to what I said at the beginning: big overview, did it in just an hour, okay? Big overview, right from very, very basic, right all the way – how is it to hear all that? Just wanted to paint a little bit of a roadmap, and just see how that is. This is the map, some possibilities of the map. Can I just ...? Maybe it’s helpful. Maybe not. Maybe it gets bearings, and maybe not.

Okay, let’s have a minute or two of quiet together.

¹ Sn 5:6.

² DN 22.

³ SN 12:15.