

Mindfulness of Dhammas (Pali) or Dharmas (Sanskrit)



Our speaker for July 29th, 2009 was Susan Ezequelle. Susan has been practicing meditation since 1997. A student of Gil Fronsdal, she worked closely with Gil and other community members to found the Insight Meditation Center, where she teaches meditation classes and yoga.

The notes on the Dharma talk are Susan's, except for the inserted references. This is the third talk in the series on Mindfulness.

Review of Satipatthana & 4 Foundations of Mindfulness

The Satipatthana Suttas is the earliest text we have for teaching insight meditation or Vipassana. It's the Buddha's instructions for developing awareness, for awakening to our experience in life. And it's interesting that nowhere does the Buddha describe his awakening in terms of what it was, but only in terms of what this awakening freed him from, only in terms of the qualities of mind that were no longer present in him – the cravings, the ill will, the confusion, the and numbness.

4th Foundation, Mindfulness of Dharmas.

Dharmas has several different meanings depending on the context. It can sometimes mean "the truth" or "the teachings" but in the case of the Satipattana Sutta it means Mental Objects, or things the mind can know. And it has to do with certain mental qualities, or mental states. These mental states are described in this sutta as being either those that bind us, enslave us, stand in the way of our liberation, or those that move us towards freedom, those that liberate the mind from suffering.

So what are the states that enslave the mind, that cloud the mind, that keep it from being free and light?

These states are the Five Hindrances:

Working with these states is a key part of the practice, especially when we first begin to meditate. The reason we want to meet these Hindrances with our best effort, our best mindfulness, is because they hinder our ability to work with, to train the mind, they stand in the way of inclining the mind towards freedom, towards liberation from suffering. They cause the mind to take on a kind of brittle quality. And when you try to work with a material that's brittle, what happens? It's not malleable, it can break.

So when we work these states, it's important to just bring our bare attention to them. Because when we get caught in our dismay over them – Oh, not that restlessness again, oh not that boredom again – when we react, when we get caught up in judging and critiquing ourselves around these states, then we end up adding to this brittleness of the mind. So when the hindrances arise, it's important to note when these secondary mind states -- dismay and judgment – arise, and then let them go, because when we're caught in reactivity to them, resisting them, berating ourselves over them, then the mind simply becomes more clouded, more brittle, even harder to work with in our practice.

As we work with these states – and we can use the RAIN acronym very effectively here -- noting them, investigating them, then they often begin to dissipate, kind of like a fog that lifts from the mind. And then the mind becomes more and more malleable, less brittle, and it gets easier and easier to train it, to make it more and more free and light.

- **R**ecognize. Notice that the negative state, the hindrance, is happening. “Oh, I’m getting angry.”
- **A**ccept it. Don’t react, don’t get in denial. Things are what they are. Don’t beat yourself up “I’m so undisciplined, I can’t control myself”. If you are angry, accept the fact that you are angry.
- **I**nvestigate. What does this anger feel like? Do I feel warmer? Does my pulse accelerate? What is it that’s happening to my body? Understand what it means to be angry.
- **N**on-identifying or non-clinging. Let it go. Don’t play the tape over and over, don’t obsess, don’t justify it, don’t hold on to it. Just let it go.

Free and light is another way of describing a mind that is at rest, at ease. This is something I’ve mentioned quite a bit in my talks, this ability, and the importance of it, to cultivate a mind that’s at rest, to see the benefits of living with a mind that’s at rest, that’s not agitated, that’s not wandering around looking for something – some distraction, something pleasant to get involved with, entangled with, fettered to, something to judge or critique, something to get self-righteous about.

So when the Buddha says, "No other thing do I know, O monks, that brings so much harm as a mind that is untamed, unguarded, unprotected, and uncontrolled." He’s talking about taking charge of the mind, safeguarding it, protecting it from “floating away.” Remember one of the descriptions of mindfulness or sati is “not floating away.”

When we guard the mind, when we cultivate ways of keeping it at rest, when we cultivate focus, tranquility, serenity, a peaceful mind, then we can train it more easily, incline it towards freedom rather than towards enslavement.

I’ll share with you an experience I had recently that was for me a revelation, a

kind of water mark, that showed me how different the quality of my mind is now compared with ten years ago when I first started this practice. My husband and I took a vacation earlier this month to the eastern Sierras. We rented a kayak and put it on the rack on my husband's pickup and we took a paddling vacation. We kayaked first on Mono Lake and then we headed up into the mountains, we took Kit Carson pass, and we stayed up in the mountains for a few days and kayaked some of the alpine lakes.

And on the day after 4th of July, we kayaked on a little lake, starting out early in the morning and there was no one else on the lake. We had it all to ourselves for a few hours. And it was so tranquil and beautiful. I noticed there was something missing in this experience of heading out into a beautiful peaceful natural setting like that. I remembered the feeling that would come over me years ago when I would take a vacation like this, away from the noise and turbulence of the world, and the feeling was kind of like a falling into peacefulness, calmness. But this time that feeling of "falling into," a deep kind of settling, wasn't there. And it wasn't there because I realized that through this practice my mind was already deeply quiet, it is in a more or less constant state of rest, so there was no falling into, there was no contrast of one state of mind – an agitated one -- compared with another. So this is the benefit of guarding the mind, of not letting it have its way with us. Of actually choosing where we want to allow our awareness to alight, so to speak. Where do we want to place our attention. How can we safeguard the mind from getting entangled with things that aren't beneficial?

And our attention has its own power, doesn't it? If we give over our attention, our minds, to anger, to resentment, to envy, to bitterness, these qualities are nurtured, they tend to take root and grow stronger. And of course our practice isn't to deny that these emotions exist, to ignore them, but once we've recognized and investigated them with our mindfulness – this practice is all about paying attention to what is – then we can direct our awareness elsewhere. When we direct our awareness, our attention, to the kindness in our hearts, to the forgiveness, to the compassion, then those are the qualities that take root and grow.

So last week we talked about Mindfulness of Mind, or Citta, or Consciousness, the 3rd Foundation of Mindfulness. And we talked about the 3 Defilements in the mind that color our experience, that cause us to act in unskillful ways if we're not mindful of them. Those 3 Poisons are:

- Greed
- Hatred
- Delusion

The 5 Hindrances are actually manifestations of these 3 Poisons. Clearly the Hindrance of sensual desire is rooted in Greed, the Hindrance of aversion or ill

will is rooted in Hatred, and the other 3 Hindrances – sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt have their roots in Delusion.

So it's important for us to investigate, to get to know intimately both the poisons or defilements of the mind – greed, hatred, delusion – as well as the hindrances that cloud that mind, make it brittle, and that have their origins in the defilements. Because if we want to have a healthy mind, if we want our actions in life to be firmly rooted in the beneficial states of the mind, then we have to understand these poisons that cause the mind to be ill.

We can clearly see in the world around us the results of minds that are allowed to be overwhelmed by greed, hatred, and delusion. Minds driven by greed, by wanting, have created and are furthering the consumer society we live in – where advertising for products has tremendous power over people, so much power that credit card debt in this country has spiraled out of control. Greed and wanting is at the root of the financial meltdown that has hurt so many people. It's what is at the root of the destruction of our natural environment.

When you look at the wars, the violence, you see the results of minds driven by hatred. When you see people who are confused, who have no sense of who they are or what their purpose is in life, you see the results of minds rooted in delusion.

Now when we look at the Hindrances, the Buddha had some very specific instructions for how to work with these mind states.

"How, O bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu live contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the five hindrances?"

"Here, O bhikkhus, when sensuality is present, a bhikkhu knows with understanding: 'I have sensuality,' or when sensuality is not present, he knows with understanding: 'I have no sensuality.'

He understands how the arising of the non-arisen sensuality comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen sensuality comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned sensuality comes to be.

When anger is present, he knows with understanding: 'I have anger,' or when anger is not present, he knows with understanding: 'I have no anger.' He understands how the arising of the non-arisen anger comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen anger comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned anger comes to be.

When sloth and torpor are present, he knows with understanding: 'I have sloth and torpor,' or when sloth and torpor are not present, he knows with understanding: 'I have no sloth and torpor.' He understands how the arising of non-arisen sloth and torpor comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen sloth and torpor comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned sloth and torpor comes to be.

When agitation and worry are present, he knows with understanding: 'I have agitation and worry,' or when agitation and worry are not present, he knows with understanding: 'I have no agitation and worry.' He understands how the arising of non-arisen agitation and worry comes to be; and he understands how the abandoning of the arisen agitation and worry comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned agitation and worry comes to be.

When doubt is present, he knows with understanding: 'I have doubt,' or when doubt is not present, he knows with understanding: 'I have no doubt.' He understands how the arising of non-arisen doubt comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen doubt comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned doubt comes to be.

"Thus he lives contemplating mental object in mental objects, internally, or he lives contemplating mental object in mental objects, externally, or he lives contemplating mental object in mental objects, internally and externally. He lives contemplating origination-things in mental objects, or he lives contemplating dissolution-things in mental objects, or he lives contemplating origination-and-dissolution-things in mental objects. Or his mind is established with the thought: 'Mental objects exist,' to the extent necessary for just knowledge and remembrance and he lives independent and clings to naught in the world.

(SN10:36 <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.soma.html>)

So in the case of sensual desire, the first of the hindrances, first we simply recognize that it's present. No judging, no reaction. Simply recognize that it's present. Then the Buddha stresses the importance of also recognizing when it's NOT present. He describes this quality of mind in another discourse as feeling the same as "being free of debt," a feeling of lightness, of freedom. And he teaches it this way because when we have a contrast, then we can really know, we really feel in ourselves, right down deep into the body, the feeling and the benefit of being free of wanting.

The Buddha was also very clear about the importance of understanding, what are the causes and conditions that lead to the arising of desire, or ill will, or sloth and torpor, and so on. This takes mindfulness, right? We need to be paying attention to see not only when the wanting arises, the causes and conditions for its arising, but also to understand how our minds get caught in it.

And last there is the abandoning of these mental states, which as we can see through our lens of mindfulness, are not beneficial if our intention is to cultivate a mind that is light, malleable, trainable, not brittle. This is very practical, pragmatic advice, isn't it? This pragmatic, practical approach is the hallmark of the Buddha. His teachings are never moralistic but always practical, logical. And for me, this is what originally attracted me to this practice, that it makes sense to me when I apply it to my own experiences in life. There's no belief system here, no metaphysical theorizing. It's all grounded right here, right now, in our experience of every moment.

So working with the Hindrances, we first simply recognize when they are present, we remind ourselves that they are not beneficial or useful to us in our practice towards freedom from suffering. Then we see that to really investigate these states it's helpful to decouple them from their objects and to simply be mindful of what it feels like to be in a wanting state, or an aversive state. A wanting state, for example, is often used to fill an emptiness we may be experiencing, a loneliness or a sadness, for example.

Now follows the section on the Five Aggregates. Aggregate being a heap or a mass made up of a collection of particles. And the Buddha offered this teaching as a way of illustrating a key source of suffering. How we relate to these aggregates, how we cling to them.

The 5 aggregates are: Body, Feeling Tone, Perception, Formations, and Consciousness. When we talked about Mindfulness of the Body, the first talk I gave, we talked about how much suffering there is when we identify with our bodies – remember the Buddha offered several ways of working with this clinging, several antidotes -- reflecting on the foulness of certain aspects of the body, contemplating the charnel grounds, what happens to the body at death.

Feeling Tone – how we tend to want to hold on to, to cling to, the pleasant aspects of our experience and how we want the unpleasant ones to go away.

Perception – this is how we create certain mental concepts about the world. This is a stove, this is a book, and so on.

Formations – these include our intentions, our thoughts and stories about experience, our emotions.

Consciousness – the space within which all these aggregates arise, our awareness of all these elements.

The Buddha taught that when we identify with one of these aggregates –many people, for example, identify strongly with their thoughts, or with their opinions – then there is suffering. He also taught that when we believe we actually have control over one or more of these aggregates, suffering occurs. He taught that when we cling to the idea of some sort of “true self” as defined by these aggregates, or when we pursue some idea of, you know, what is my true self, the Buddha taught that is not really a worthwhile pursuit.

The Buddha never engaged in discussions around “self” and “no self.” He never taught that there is “no self.” His teaching was all about the suffering that comes from clinging to one or more of the aggregates, the suffering that comes from identifying with them. Because of course they are always in process, they are constantly arising and passing away, there is nothing solid to hold on to.

So then his teaching becomes -- how can we use these aggregates, these components that many people cling to as themselves. The Buddha was more concerned with how can we use these components skillfully, how can we use our bodies, our particular strengths, our volitions, our intention, our choices in life, how can we put all of these to use to move us towards freedom, towards happiness.

Now at this point the focus of this sutta changes. Up to this point the emphasis was on “bare attention,” or “non-reactive awareness,” and now the emphasis changes to understanding the mental processes, or the psychological processes that occur in the mind. These teachings help us to understand the processes in the mind that cause us to suffer and those that free the mind.

The next section is called “The Six Bases.” And like the teaching on the aggregates, it is presented as an exercise, an exercise that strengthens our mindfulness. In the Five Aggregates, the Buddha says:

"Here, O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu thinks: 'Thus is material form; thus is the arising of material form; and thus is the disappearance of material form.

Thus is feeling; thus is the arising of feeling; and thus is the disappearance of feeling.

Thus is perception; thus is the arising of perception; and thus is the disappearance of perception.

Thus are the formations; thus is the arising of the formations; and thus is the disappearance of the formations. Thus is consciousness; thus is the

arising of consciousness; and thus is the disappearance of consciousness.'

Thus he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects, internally... and clings to naught in the world.

In the Six Bases, the exercise is to contemplate the 6 bases through which we experience our world, namely the 5 senses, plus in Buddhism we have the 6th sense, the mind, or our consciousness of what's happening.

"Here, O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu understands the eye and material forms and the fetter that arises dependent on both (eye and forms); he understands how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

He understands the ear and sounds and the fetter that arises dependent on both (ear and sounds); he understands how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

He understands the organ of smell and odors and the fetter that arises dependent on both (the organ of smell and odors); he understands how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

He understands the organ of taste and flavors and the fetter that arises dependent on both (the organ of taste and flavors); he understands how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

He understands the organ of touch and tactual objects and the fetter that arises dependent on both (the organ of touch and tactual objects); he understands how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

He understands consciousness and mental objects and the fetter that arises dependent on both (consciousness and mental objects); he understands how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he understands how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he understands how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

For example, suppose we see something that attracts us. We start to become entangled with the object we see. We want it, we need it, we have to have it. The crucial component in this teaching is the fetter, or the entanglement with the object. The practice then is all about “disentangling” ourselves with the objects “out there,” it’s about watching for the arising of the fetter, abandoning the fetter, and continuing to be vigilant at the sense doors. Gil likes the term “safeguarding” the sense doors, which means we watch out for the entanglements and when we see them begin to develop, we abandon them, we let them go.

Than Geoff (http://www.oberlin.edu/alummag/spring2004/feat_monk.html) uses the example of a board of directors. You’re the CEO, and when you have a Board of Directors meeting, each Director brings his/her own viewpoint and agenda to the table. Everyone gets a chance to speak and present his or her perceptions and priorities. However, the CEO gets to decide whether to accept that viewpoint or whether to veto it.

The Directors are like the bases. So like the CEO we can’t control what the people at the table bring up, we can’t control what arises in the mind – if you’ve been practicing even for just a short time, you’ve seen that all kinds of strange thoughts and fantasies come into the mind. It’s just the nature of the mind, but like the CEO, you do have the veto. I’m going to drop this craving, I’m going to let go of my resistance to this situation. And this is the power of staying with the “felt sense” of our experience, fully embodied, distilling out what’s elemental – what is the felt sense of craving, what is the felt sense of resistance -- and what’s abstraction. This is the path to freedom.

So now we come to the section on the 7 Factors of Awakening, sometimes called “the sap of Buddhism,” because these factors are present in all the various branches and traditions of the tree of Buddhism. I like that the word “awake” is used, because that is the whole point of our practice, to be awake to our experience in life, just as it is. The term “awake” gives more of a feeling of openness, of spaciousness, sometimes, than the word Mindfulness.

Again what we are awakening to are the processes in the mind, the constant flux of states arising and falling away. This being attuned to processes kind of drives home the insight in us that things are always changing in this life, there’s no solid ground. What we are also attuned to in our practice are those processes that lead us to a sense of well-being and ease in life, and those that lead us to

unhealthy states of mind. Through this practice, we are cultivating, developing ourselves – this is not a passive practice, we are taking an active role in understanding the causes and conditions that lead to certain mind states, and taking an active role in cultivating the skillful ones and dropping the unskillful ones. So don't let anyone ever tell you that this is a passive practice. Now what are these 7 factors?

“And further, monks, a monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the seven factors of enlightenment.

How, monks, does a monk live contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the seven factors of enlightenment?

Herein, monks, when the enlightenment-factor of mindfulness is present, the monk knows, "The enlightenment-factor of mindfulness is in me," or when the enlightenment-factor of mindfulness is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of mindfulness is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of mindfulness comes to be; and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of mindfulness comes to be.

When the enlightenment-factor of the investigation of mental objects is present, the monk knows, "The enlightenment-factor of the investigation of mental objects is in me"; when the enlightenment-factor of the investigation of mental objects is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of the investigation of mental objects is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of the investigation of mental objects comes to be, and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of the investigation of mental objects comes to be.

When the enlightenment-factor of energy is present, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of energy is in me"; when the enlightenment-factor of energy is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of energy is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of energy comes to be, and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of energy comes to be.

When the enlightenment-factor of joy is present, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of joy is in me"; when the enlightenment-factor of joy is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of joy is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of joy comes to be, and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of joy comes to be.

When the enlightenment-factor of tranquility is present, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of tranquility is in me"; when the enlightenment-factor of tranquility is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of tranquility is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of tranquility comes to be, and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of tranquility comes to be.

When the enlightenment-factor of concentration is present, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of concentration is in me"; when the enlightenment-factor of concentration is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of concentration is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of concentration comes to be, and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of concentration comes to be.

When the enlightenment-factor of equanimity is present, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of equanimity is in me"; when the enlightenment-factor of equanimity is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of equanimity is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of equanimity comes to be, and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of equanimity comes to be.

Thus he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects internally, or he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects externally, or he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects internally and externally. He lives contemplating origination-factors in mental objects, or he lives contemplating dissolution-factors in mental objects, or he lives contemplating origination-and-dissolution-factors in mental objects. Or his mindfulness is established with the thought, "Mental objects exist," to the extent necessary just for knowledge and mindfulness, and he lives detached, and clings to nothing in the world. Thus, monks, a monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the seven factors of enlightenment."

(<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html>)

What we find is that as our practice deepens, strengthens, these factors automatically become stronger in us. As the Buddha points out, it's important to recognize when these qualities of the mind and heart are present, so we can fuel them, feed them, because they are, when developed one leading into and nurturing the other, when we get to the Equanimity, the balance in the mind, this is when the mind starts to truly be at rest. And when the mind is at rest, relaxed, we are setting the conditions for deep insights to arise, we can look very deeply

into our experience because the waters are calm, they're like glass, so we can look right through, deep down into the depths.

So the last section, the last exercise, you might say, in developing awareness, is the teaching on the 4 Noble Truths. This was the very first teaching the Buddha gave after his awakening. It is said that when he arrived in the thicket in the forest where his companions were residing – these were the ascetics, his closest companions when he was also living the ascetic life – it is said that the Buddha's presence was luminous, all cravings had ceased in him, and this had a powerful impact on his former companions.

So the Four Noble Truths:

The Buddha presented this teaching as what you and I need to know, to understand, so that we can develop this practice for ourselves and experience the same benefits that the Buddha experienced.

Herein, monks, a monk knows, "*This is suffering,*" according to reality; he knows, "*This is the origin of suffering,*" according to reality; he knows, "*This is the cessation of suffering,*" according to reality; he knows "*This is the road leading to the cessation of suffering,*" according to reality.

The last Exercise – recognize stress, clinging, look for the suffering, look at the causes and conditions, the holding, and then let go.