The Common Ground of Letting Go

Liberation Through Non-Clinging Across Buddhist Traditions

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"By not clinging, the mind is liberated."

~Majjhima Nikāya

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha

When I first published the book *One Dharma*[1] in 2003, I was grappling with an existential dilemma: what to do when great meditation masters in different traditions offer contradictory perspectives on the ultimate nature of reality. At the time, it felt as though the entire trajectory of my spiritual life hung in the balance. After months of inquiry, two simple notions resolved the issue—at least for now.

First, I realized that until I was fully enlightened (and perhaps not even then), I had no way of knowing which perspective was ultimately correct. I simply could not know what final liberation would reveal. Resting in this uncertainty proved to be a great relief. Rather than causing confusion, it allowed my mind to settle into an openness that supported deeper inquiry.

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1 The word dharma has many meanings, including the truth, the way things are, and more specifically in this context, the teachings of the Buddha. The phrase *one dharma* is my attempt to see the unity underlying the teachings in various Buddhist traditions.

Second, I realized that one way to approach the diverse philosophical descriptions across traditions was to explore a common understanding of what frees the mind. My interest in this theme arises from sectarian divides that persist to this day. Many traditions claim to be the best, quickest, or most authentic path to spiritual enlightenment.[2]

There are many examples of this conceit. The terms "greater vehicle" (Mahayana) and "lesser vehicle" (Hinayana) clearly suggest a hierarchy, with later sutras often portraying the great early disciples as unable to fully grasp supposedly deeper teachings. Conversely, many Theravada practitioners regard the Pali Canon as the only authentic record of the Buddha's words, dismissing later teachings as influenced by Hindu thought.

A contemporary expression of this sectarianism appears in discussions of dual and non-dual awareness. Just as mindfulness has gained prominence as a tool for easing suffering, both in its broad secular applications and in the deepest aspects of meditative understanding, the framework of non-dual awareness has become a popular way to describe both the method and, for some, the goal of practice. At times, there is a tendency to privilege the experience of the non-dual as being deeper or more complete than what are deemed dualistic practices. Ironically, this creates its own duality.

What, then, do the terms dual and non-dual refer to, and is this distinction important on the path to liberation? Each of

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2 Bhikkhu Anālayo addresses this phenomenon in his book, *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions*.

these terms can refer to a variety of experiences, and confusion often arises when the same word or phrase carries different meanings in different contexts. We should not assume that the same term implies a shared metaphysical view across different Buddhist traditions. As in many Dharma discussions (and also in exploring other topics), clarity in how we use terms is essential.

There are different understandings of dualistic perception: one is the perception of distinctions between this and that, between existence and non-existence, between samsara and nirvana; another is the experience of an observer separate from the observed. Similarly, the term non-dual awareness can refer to different levels of experience. It can refer to the unification of mind in deep meditative absorption or to the nonseparation of observer and observed. It can also refer to the Dzogchen view of mind as the union of clarity and emptiness, non-dual wisdom being their inseparability.

Despite differences in understanding how these terms are being used and the nature of reality they may be pointing to, some fundamental commonalities capture the essence of Dharma. In the Pali Canon, and perhaps in later traditions as well, when the Buddha was asked what he teaches, his reply was often some variation of "suffering and the end of suffering." This is the point of it all. By privileging a particular perspective, we risk overlooking those essential qualities of a liberated mind across traditions.

The Buddha made clear in so many different ways that craving and clinging to anything at all is the cause of suffering. Most Buddhist traditions agree that liberation is experienced in a mind free of clinging—to the body, the mind,

or even awareness itself. The great Indian adept, Tilopa, expressed the importance of this to his disciple, Naropa: "It is not appearances that bind you; it is your clinging that binds you. Cut through your clinging, Naropa."[3]

I began to see non-clinging and its precursor, the cessation of craving,[4] as central to liberation across nearly all Buddhist traditions, the foundation upon which different final goals may be realized. Depending on one's aspiration, this might be the Arahant of early Buddhism or Buddhahood as taught in the later traditions.

Building on this understanding, which is succinctly expressed in the first three Noble Truths—suffering, its cause, and its end—we can then explore the fourth Noble Truth: the way to the end of suffering. If craving is the cause of suffering, and liberation is through the cessation of craving and clinging, the question then becomes how different traditions accomplish this, even when their metaphysics and end goals differ.

There are many methods for achieving non-clinging, and different doorways open to this freedom, each highlighting one Buddhist perspective or another One comprehensive framework for exploring these methods is the three universal

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3 Tilopa's oral instructions to Nāropa, documented in the Mahāmudrā lineage's texts and teachings, and supported by the original Tibetan wording.

4 Although there are subtle differences between these terms, at various times I will be referencing wanting, craving, and clinging as being the cause of suffering.

characteristics—impermanence, dukkha,[5] and non-self. Although these characteristics are intimately connected, one or another of them may become more predominant in different traditions or for different practitioners, even as all of them are realized in the end.

Non-Duality and the Teachings on Non-Self

One of the liberating insights common to almost all Buddhist traditions is the realization of non-self: the absence of any permanent essence in this mind/body process that can be claimed as "I" or "mine." An oft-repeated instruction in the Pali texts says to see all things with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." In this realization, the "I" or "self" as subject disappears—or rather, we realize that, except as a cognitive distortion, it was never truly there.[6]

In many explicitly non-dual practices, which are often prominent in Mahayana and Vajrayana, this non-self perspective is often emphasized. Such teachings are effective for glimpsing

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5 I left the Pali term 'dukkha' untranslated here because it has a wide range of meanings. Most often it is translated as suffering, but if all conditioned things are dukkha, suffering doesn't always seem to quite fit our experience. Many times, we experience happiness and joy, and we don't feel it as suffering at all. Here's where other translations of dukkha might deepen our understanding. Words like unstable, unreliable, or unsatisfying might better illuminate the breadth of what dukkha means. Things are inherently unstable because everything is constantly changing, becoming otherwise. So even pleasant experiences are unreliable as a source of our lasting happiness. This points to the essence of what dukkha means: the inevitability of unwanted experiences.

6 This understanding does not obviate the usefulness of these terms in our everyday communications.

and deepening this realization. While impermanence and dukkha are easily recognized and can also lead to non-clinging, insight into non-self is so radically transformative that it can reshape our entire practice. Yet the point is to see through the illusion of self as a way to end our suffering and not to get attached to any particular method of doing so.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the great Tibetan Dzogchen masters of the last century, highlighted the importance of this:

> The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the lower realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of "I," you would find it easy to be free, and to free others, too.
>
> Use any practice you do to dissolve this idea of "I" and the self-oriented motivations that accompany it. Even if you do not succeed in the beginning, keep trying.[7]

Another way of understanding non-duality—widely discussed today—is through resting in awareness as various mental objects arise. A simple example occurred during a walk when I heard a bird singing. At first there was a clear distinction: the bird in the sky and me walking below. Then

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7 *The Collected Works of Dilgo Khyentse*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010), 292–93.

a subtle shift occurred, and the experience was spontaneously expressed as a haiku:

Bird song
In the empty sky
Of mind

In that moment, any sense of separation dissolved—there was only birdsong. It was interesting to move back and forth between these two ways of perceiving. Using the analogy of the mind as an empty sky, one perspective locates the sound as an object; the other emphasizes the awareness that knows it. In both cases, however, sound and knowing are present. The question is not which approach is superior, but how each discloses a different aspect of experience.

This is where confusion sometimes arises in contemporary discussions of non-duality. Experiences such as "bird song in the empty sky of mind" may offer a taste of the non-dual, yet something essential to liberation may still be missing: the direct realization of the selfless, empty nature of both knowing and what is known. One may be resting in awareness while still subtly identifying with the act of knowing itself. That identification sustains a pre-verbal sense of self. Whether we speak of non-duality or of non-appropriation—of not taking anything to be "I" or "mine"—the crucial point for liberation is seeing through the specific duality of a "self-as-subject" that knows an object.

Even when this subject-object dichotomy collapses, objects are still known. Although there is no self standing apart as subject, two interdependent aspects of experience remain: knowing and what is known (whether we call them objects or

appearances). They cannot be pulled apart. An illuminating comparison is color and shape in visual perception: distinct, yet never encountered separately. In the same way, consciousness and its object arise together through dependent conditions, without implying a single underlying essence.

It may be helpful, then, to understand 'dual' and 'non-dual' not as metaphysical claims about ultimate reality, but as modes of perception serving a specific purpose. They are complementary lenses, each with its own efficacy. What ultimately matters is not the label but the effect: does a given way of seeing loosen identification and appropriation, or does it quietly sustain them? In this sense, the old phrase that echoes through Madhyamaka and Zen—emerging from the thunderous silence of Vimalakirti—captures the point precisely: "Not one, not two."

Other Paths of Practice that Cultivate Non-Duality

Many paths of practice do not explicitly emphasize non-duality, yet they may lead to that understanding, often described instead as 'selflessness' or 'emptiness of self.' Although the term non-duality gained prominence in the early Mahayana Prajnaparamita texts (1st c. BCE – 1st c. CE), several centuries after the Buddha, the experience it points to is already evident in the well-known Bahiya Sutta from the Pali Canon. To describe this teaching as "non-dual," however, is not to make a metaphysical claim about ultimate reality, nor to impose a category foreign to the early Buddhist discourses. Rather, it is to point toward a mode of experience free from identification and ownership, without invoking a formal non-dual framework. From an

early Buddhist perspective, the decisive criterion for any such formulation is pragmatic: does it foster non-clinging and lead to the ending of suffering.

The Buddha's instruction to Bahiya expresses this with striking directness:

> In the seen there will be only the seen;
> in the heard, only the heard;
> in the sensed, only the sensed;
> in the cognized, only the cognized.
>
> When for you there is only the seen…
> then, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in connection with that.
> When there is no 'you' there,
> you are neither here nor there nor in between the two.
> This, just this, is the end of suffering.[8]

Perhaps the term selflessness, then, more clearly reflects what the state of liberative non-duality reveals.

Stabilizing the Experience of Non-Duality

I recently received an email from someone who asked an extremely important question. He wrote, "I consider myself quite fortunate to experience non-dual awareness, but I've been hung up on the endeavor of what to do now." Whatever his particular experience may have been, this raises a question that many teachers have addressed over the centuries: how

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8 Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Udāna & the Itivuttaka* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005), Ud 1.10.

to stabilize different realizations so that they inform the way we live and the choices we make. It is one thing to have experiences that provide a quite different perspective from our usual way of perceiving the world, and another to have it transform our lives in a meaningful way. Many of us are familiar with having deep insights, only to easily fall back into habitual modes of perception and understanding.

Mindfulness

The question then becomes: How to proceed? How do we practice stabilizing glimpses of selfless awareness? We begin by strengthening the quality of mindfulness. Unless we have trained ourselves to observe our minds and what happens within them, we may not realize just how prevalent the continuous streams of thought are throughout the day. The effect of these unnoticed thoughts on the mind can be compared to a movie soundtrack. Often, we are hardly aware of it, being totally engrossed in the storyline. Yet the soundtrack is conditioning our inner environment, designed to manipulate our feelings in various ways—happy, tense, frightened, amused—all conditioned by processes we rarely notice.

Through practice, especially in sessions of formal meditation, we may become somewhat adept at recognizing dramatic thoughts, those with a strong emotional charge. But much more frequently there are light thoughts that are brief and hardly leave a trace. While doing walking meditation on one recent retreat, I began to pay particular attention to these light and quickly passing thoughts. I was surprised to realize how often they arose and how many

of them referenced a sense of self: a memory, a plan, a comment, or a judgment. It became clear that each time I was lost in one of these ephemeral thoughts, I was reinforcing a felt sense of self.[9]

Dudjom Rinpoche, one of the most highly revered Dzogchen masters of the twentieth century, wrote:

> When you are meditating, it is easy to identify your coarse thoughts when they arise suddenly. But until a few of your subtle thoughts have arisen and are recognized, you do not know that they are there. These are called 'undercurrents of thought.' They are the sneaky thieves of meditation, and for that reason it is very important to post the guard of mindfulness.[10]

All traditions teach the importance of cultivating and strengthening mindfulness. The Pali Canon underscores the critical role of mindfulness in the well-known opening of the Satipatthana Sutta:

> Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization

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9 These thoughts are often some expressions of "I am," which in Pali is called *mana*, referring to the mind comparing oneself with others in one way or another or imagining oneself over time. Of note, mana is not uprooted from the mind-stream until full enlightenment, so we do want to be mindful of it.

10 *Dudjom Sung Bum, A Heart-Jewel for the Fortunate*, trans. Lama Dechen Yeshe Wangmo (Santa Cruz: Bero Jeydren Publications, 1999), 337.

> of Nibbana—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.[11]

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche likewise highlights the importance of cultivating mindfulness:

> Let the mind remain in a relaxed and open state…. Just as a young child cannot be left on its own but needs the constant attention of his parents so he won't get lost, mindfulness is necessary so that the mind does not get lost in distraction. Mindfulness is not something that is acquired right away; perseverance is needed. It is necessary to be mindful not only while resting in the state of meditative evenness, but that mindfulness needs to be kept in any circumstances. While eating, while walking, etc., it is important to be constantly alert and vigilant in watching the condition of the mind.

Rinpoche continues:

> So do not be satisfied by a mere glimpse of awareness but allow it to become unchangingly present. This is achieved through mindfulness and vigilance. At the beginning, vigilance means to pay constant attention to one's state of mind, examining whether the mind is distracted or not from the recognition of awareness. This is a somewhat fabricated or contrived mindfulness. Mindfulness will develop gradually…. When the point

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11 *Majjhima Nikaya, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanomoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 145.

> is reached where a thought of desire or aversion arises, awareness is there at the same time, without having to purposefully arouse it. That is uncontrived, absolute mindfulness. At this stage, all thoughts will be liberated as they arise.[12,13]

As mindfulness strengthens, we also become more aware of mental hindrances—desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. They are called hindrances because they obstruct the mind from developing wise discernment and concentration. Being mindful of these hindrances becomes a skillful and effective way of not being overcome by them.

Concentration

Along with mindfulness, concentration plays a critical role in stabilizing our understanding and realization of selfless non-duality. When concentration develops, it keeps the hindrances at bay, enabling us to see more clearly and explore more profoundly various aspects of the Dharma.

The Buddha highlighted the necessity of developing concentration in one verse in the Dhammapada: "There can be no concentration in one who lacks wisdom. There can be no wisdom in one who lacks concentration. He who has concentration as well as wisdom is, indeed, close to Nibbana."

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12 From the commentary on *The Torch that Dispels Darkness*, an extensive biography of Guru Rinpoche revealed by Pema Lingpa.

13 A similar teaching is found in the Theravada Abhidhamma, where it describes prompted and unprompted consciousness; that is, awareness that is either deliberate or effortless.

In a striking passage from the Pali Canon, the Buddha tells Kassapa, one of his great disciples, about what leads to the longevity of the Dharma: dwelling with reverence toward the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, toward the training, and toward concentration. And how the absence of these five things leads to its decay.[14] When I first came across this passage, I was surprised that of all the different mental qualities the Buddha might have mentioned with regard to a matter of such great import—the longevity of the teachings—he singled out concentration as being a key essential element for stabilizing awareness.

Right Effort

This raises interesting questions about different modes of practice. H.H. the Dalai Lama has recounted how even Milarepa, one of the greatest Tibetan yogis, faced tremendous difficulties and needed arduous effort over many years to attain complete enlightenment. In vipassana practice, significant emphasis is placed on mindfulness of the body, being the first of the four foundations of mindfulness the Buddha declared to be the direct path to awakening. Some teachers in this tradition emphasize the importance of strong effort to penetrate the object of meditation as a means of going beyond our conceptual understanding of it. However, this strong effort can sometimes reinforce the sense of someone actively exerting that effort.

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14 *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 681.

Effortless Awareness

But even within methods that emphasize strong effort, proper practice naturally leads to a state of effortless awareness. From this state, the mind can open to what is called "gaining the vision of the Dharma," or "opening of the Dharma eye." That marks the point at which identity view is uprooted.

A salient point emerges here in both vipassana and explicitly non-dual practices: How to rest in effortless awareness (however we arrive there) without identifying with that awareness, without making awareness the home of self, the last hold-out of "I"?[15] Sometimes awareness feels boundless and centerless, yet even in this wonderfully expansive state, there can be a subtle identification with awareness or a faint sense of someone experiencing it.

Mahasi Sayadaw, a renowned vipassana meditation master of the twentieth century, highlighted one aspect of this:

> At times there is nothing to note, with the body disappearing and the sense of touch lost. However, at this moment, knowing consciousness is still apparent. In the very clear, open space of the sky there remains only one very clear, blissful consciousness, which is very clear beyond comparison and very blissful. The yogi tends to delight in such clear, blissful consciousness. But this consciousness is not going to

15 Although the terms mindfulness, awareness, consciousness, and mind have different connotations, they all refer to various aspects of cognition.

stay permanent…. It has to be noticed as "knowing, knowing."[16]

We see the same caution about identification with awareness in Dzogchen and other non-dual traditions as well. In Dzogchen and Mahamudra, although using different terminology, the fundamental nature of mind is expressed as the union of clarity and emptiness. Thrangu Rinpoche observed that the nature of mind is sometimes obscured because the clarity aspect (knowing) obscures the emptiness aspect.[17] Khyentse Rinpoche makes the same point: "Those who cling to the lucid or to the void aspect of the mind are caught in dualistic attachment to subject and object."[18]

In any instruction to rest in awareness, we need to understand that awareness implies recognizing its empty nature as well as its lucid aspect. And not getting attached to emptiness is equally important. Nagarjuna, one of the greatest of the Indian adepts, warns that even the view of emptiness can become a trap when grasped as a view. "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material, concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who are attached to emptiness."[19]

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16 Mahasi Sayadaw, from the translation of a taped talk, "The Purification and Progress of Insight" (Malaysia, 1988). Personal correspondence, February 2021.

17 Khanchan Thrangu Rinpoche, reprinted from *A Song for the King: Saraha on Mahamudra Meditation* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications).

18 From the commentary on *The Torch that Dispels Darkness,* an extensive biography of Guru Rinpoche revealed by Pema Lingpa.

19 Nagarjuna, quoted in trans. Lama Surya Das, *Natural Great Perfection* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 61.

The question then arises: How do we cut through this subtle identification with the knowing capacity of mind, with awareness itself? At one point in my practice, a simple linguistic shift became a pathway for cutting through this identification. By changing how we language our experience (even silently to ourselves) from the active voice to the passive voice, we can settle effortlessly into a receptive, selfless mode.

For example, we usually think of what we're doing in the active voice: "I'm moving, I'm thinking, I'm hearing." In the passive voice, this might become: "Movement being known, thought being known, sounds being known." This shift is striking because the "I" is no longer the subject of the action. Instead, things simply arise and are known effortlessly without a sense of self. As the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, much philosophy is 'a shadow cast by grammar'; our language habits easily conjure a 'self' behind experience.

The Buddha gave a succinct and powerful teaching on this in his discourse, *The All*. In this sutta, he described the totality of our experience in just six concise phrases: "the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, the mind and mental phenomena." By being mindful of these six categories as being known, we gain glimpses—and sometimes sustained experiences—of selflessness, of *empty phenomena rolling on*.

To deepen this experience of selflessness, we can then ask the simple yet profound question: Known by what? In meditation, as different sounds arise, I may ask myself, Can I find what's knowing this sound? The sound is being known—but by what? There's nothing to find. And yet, as the Tibetan

Dzogchen master Tulku Urgyen remarked, in searching for awareness, "the not finding is the finding." This inquiry helps dissolve the subtle identification with the knowing itself, which when unnoticed, perpetuates the felt sense of a knower.

Even after these transformative insights arise, the path continues. The eleventh century Korean Zen Master Chinul expressed this in his teachings on sudden awakening, gradual cultivation:

> Although we have awakened to original nature, beginningless habit energies are extremely difficult to remove suddenly. Hindrances are formidable and habits are deeply ingrained. So how could you neglect gradual cultivation simply because of one moment of awakening? After awakening, you must constantly be on your guard. If deluded thoughts suddenly appear, do not follow after them. Then and only then will your practice reach completion.

Chinul's follow-up reminder is equally vital:

> Although you must cultivate further, you have already awakened suddenly to the fact that deluded thoughts are originally void and the mind's nature is originally pure.[20]

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20 Robert. E. Buswell, Jr., *Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul's Korean Way of Zen* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 102.

The Distortions of Perception, Mind, and View

After realizing selflessness or emptiness, some may mistakenly believe their work is finished, assuming that everything they do arises from that realization. This misconception can then become a rationale for not paying attention to the defilements that remain. Teachings in the Pali Canon explain how hindrances and strong habit energies can still influence our minds, even after uprooting the belief in self. This is the teaching on the *vipallasas*, or the distortions of mind.

> These four, O Monks, are distortions of perception, distortions of thought, distortions of view…. Sensing no change in the changing, sensing pleasure in suffering, assuming "self" where there's no self, sensing the un-lovely as lovely.[21]

The distortions differ in degree and consequences. Misperception, such as mistaking a rope for a snake, is easily corrected through closer observation. Distorted thought refers to the thoughts and feelings that arise from such misperceptions, which also can be remedied with careful attention. The deepest and most challenging to uproot is distortion of view, an entrenched belief that persists despite contrary evidence. This is particularly evident in deeply polarized political landscapes, where no amount of reasoning can break through attachment to certain views.

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21 "Vipallasa Sutta (AN 4:49), in *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Andrew Olendzki, trans, "Distortions of the Mind" (www.AccesstoInsight.org).

Even after the strong view of self has been uprooted, distortions of perception and thought will persist. The good news is that although these two are still operative, they are easier to dispel over time. Once we are free from identity view, these distortions begin to weaken.

However, there is a cautionary note: unless we recognize Chinul's reminder about the ongoing work required, these distortions may remain unnoticed. Even those with genuine realization can fall into unskillful behavior by failing to recognize these lingering tendencies. This can foster the conceit of "I am the one who has awakened," reinforcing a subtle sense of self.

Impermanence and Dukkha as Gateways to Non-Dual Awareness

Although we have discussed non-self at length, insight into impermanence and dukkha also opens the door to the freedom of the non-clinging mind. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized the transformative power of contemplating impermanence: "When perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated… it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots all conceit 'I am'."[22]

After teaching different contemplations of impermanence, the Buddha added: "Contemplating thus, one does not cling to anything in the world. When one doesn't cling, one is not

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22 *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*: *A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 961.

agitated. When one is not agitated, one personally attains Nibbana."[23]

As I was sitting during one retreat, a familiar line from the Pali texts came to mind: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Although I had read this many times, in that moment it settled deeply into my experience. Because everything that arises must also pass away, there seemed little point in craving any new experience in meditation, since whatever I desired would inevitably disappear. With this understanding, the mind naturally relaxed, releasing any sense of wanting or striving. When I then turned my attention to the nature of this non-wanting mind, it was the same experience as awareness, empty of self.[24]

The experience of dukkha can also function as a gateway to non-dual awareness. My first teacher, Munindra-ji, described how, during meditation, he felt as if his entire body was being consumed by fire. It was through the intensity of this dukkha that his mind opened to the unconditioned.

Another powerful illustration involves a monk in the Buddha's time who struggled to remember even a four-line verse of teaching. The Buddha instructed him to stand in the sun and briskly rub a white cloth in his hands. As the cloth grew soiled, the monk contemplated impermanence and the

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23 *The Majjhima Nikaya: A Translation of the Middle Length Sayings*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanomoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 344. (With Bhikkhu Bodhi's permission, I changed 'he' to 'one' for greater inclusivity.)

24 It is important to distinguish wanting and craving from aspiration, which sets the direction and can inspire us.

unattractive aspect of the body. This insight led to his full enlightenment through non-clinging.

In another discourse, the Buddha reminded thirty forest-dwelling bhikkhus of the beginningless cycle of rebirth, prompting their minds to be liberated by non-clinging.

> Bhikkhus, this samsara is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving… Enough to be disenchanted[25] toward all formations, enough to become dispassionate toward them, enough to be liberated from them…. And while this exposition was being spoken, the minds of the thirty bhikkhus were liberated from the taints by non-clinging.[26]

In this context, the phrase *empty phenomena rolling on*, which emphasizes non-self, might become *endless phenomena rolling on*, reminding us of the liberating power that comes from deeply understanding the nature of samsara—the beginningless rounds of rebirth.

Years of dedicated forest practice had prepared the minds of these monks so well that simply listening allowed the words to carry a transformative power. The lesson here is that both teaching and listening to the Dharma are them-

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25 The Pali word *nibbida* has been translated as both revulsion and disenchantment, the latter being more current and, to my mind, more apt.

26 "Timsamatta Sutta: Thirty Bhikkhus", in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha,* trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 658–659.

selves acts of meditation, and that awakening can arise from either. Liberation can occur through myriad insights, with practices tailored to each individual's unique conditioning and capacity.

Integrating the Teachings from Different Practice Traditions

We now come to the question of how different approaches can support each other rather than be in conflict. This integration occurs quite naturally when we realize that different systems of practice can each serve as skillful means for cultivating non-clinging—the essence of a free mind. One helpful way to understand the differences in various approaches is to reflect on the union of knowing and object. While some practices emphasize non-clinging to the object, others focus on non-clinging to the knowing itself.

A clear example of this distinction appears in the Mahamudra and Dzogchen traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. In these traditions, the Nature of Mind is described as the unity of emptiness and clarity (or cognizance). Although the two traditions use different terminologies and methods, their underlying essence and endpoints are comparable. Mahamudra emphasizes a gradual development, initially working with the appearances in the mind, such as thoughts and sense objects, in order to recognize their empty nature. Once this recognition is stabilized, the training is to then rest in the unity of clarity and emptiness. Dzogchen, on the other hand, emphasizes a direct introduction to resting in awareness itself. Thus, even in these liberating non-dual traditions, we find different emphases at various stages of practice.

We can observe similar differences in emphasis across many Buddhist traditions and lineages. Yet regardless of the emphasis, genuine freedom involves non-clinging to both appearance and knowing. Each of us may be drawn to a particular path that resonates deeply, but as we learn from other traditions, we may find that different teachings become interwoven strands of practice, with each strengthening the other. Much as a rope gains its strength from multiple strands woven together, our practice can become stronger through this integration. While each tradition offers its own skillful means, a shift in perspective from another system of practice can sometimes reveal new insights that serve the ultimate goal: the end of suffering.

That said, it is important to develop some depth of experience and understanding in one practice before attempting to integrate teachings from others. Rushing this process and jumping from one method to another before establishing a solid foundation can lead to confusion and doubt. But when approached skillfully, the breadth of wisdom from different traditions can be a powerful resource as we continue on the path.

Practical Integration in Practice

This integration can unfold in many ways. Imagine, for instance, that you are practicing within a non-dual frame of reference, and the mind becomes entangled in a compelling narrative about the past or future. Perhaps this narrative carries a strong emotional charge—regret, confusion, or delight. When such a story is especially seductive, it may be difficult to sustain awareness or remember non-duality as a means of release. In such moments, a simple teaching from

the Buddha in the Pali Canon can be a powerful anchor: "Let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present and cross over to the further shore."[27]

This straightforward instruction is remarkably effective for returning to awareness. Letting go of thoughts about the past and their associated emotions reminds us that the past is gone and that the story is simply thoughts arising in the present. In the same way, letting go of thoughts of the imagined future, remembering it has not yet come, grounds us in immediate experience. And the final instruction—letting go even of the present—encourages us not to cling to whatever experience has emerged in dropping the past and future. This last step naturally settles the mind in spacious awareness, characteristic of Dzogchen and other non-dual practices. This example illustrates how complementary teachings can skillfully reinforce each other.

The reverse can also be true: a non-dual perspective can sometimes bring balance to vipassana practice. While engaged in traditional vipassana meditation or simply navigating daily life, we may get entangled in thought patterns, embroiled in some life story. At such times, recalling a non-dual perspective can often disentangle the mind from attachment. A well-known story from the Chinese Ch'an tradition illustrates this: Huike, in a state of great suffering, beseeches Bodhidharma to pacify his mind. Bodhidharma responds, "Show me your mind, and I will pacify it." Huike replies, "I looked for it everywhere and cannot find it." Bodhidharma said, "There, it is already pacified."

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27 Dhammapada, verse 348

Although this could be read as a classic Zen story, it points to an effective method for coming out of a self-absorbed state. At times when I find myself lost in troubling thoughts, I may remember this exchange and quietly remind myself, "Already pacified." In those moments, the mind naturally settles into peace.

Non-dual frameworks can similarly support vipassana practice in balancing our efforts. While on retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, a revered teacher immersed in classical Theravada teachings on the progressive stages of insight, I found myself pushing too hard, caught in the wanting mind. When I recognized this, I reminded myself, "Already aware, there's nothing to do." This simple phrase, echoing Dzogchen's relaxed awareness, released the tension of unskillful striving and allowed my vipassana practice to continue with ease.

We are fortunate to live in a time when these varied teachings are accessible. Each teaching style has its unique strengths, and these examples illustrate how different styles of practice can complement one another. It is not a matter of one path being superior, but of recognizing that all are skillful means for cultivating non-clinging, the essential path to the end of suffering. Even as we pursue our own path of practice, we have the opportunity to genuinely honor and learn from them all.

Acknowledging Differences

Although liberation through non-clinging is at the heart of most Buddhist traditions and serves as the foundation for realizing different aspirations, there are some fundamental

differences of understanding about the ultimate nature of reality.

For example, the terms Nibbana/Nirvana have different meanings in Early Buddhism compared to later traditions. In the Pali Canon, Nibbana is described as the unconditioned, experienced as the cessation of craving and clinging, beyond all conditioned phenomena. It entirely transcends samsara, not as a place, but as freedom from the cycle of birth and death. In contrast, the Nature of Mind teachings in Dzogchen describe ultimate reality as the inseparability of awareness and emptiness. In this view, samsara and nirvana are said to be 'one in basis, different in recognition': the Nature of Mind is the same; obscuration versus recognition makes the difference. This distinction carries significant implications for the understanding of Buddhahood itself.

In early Buddhism, the Buddha is regarded as a historical figure who attained Supreme Enlightenment through his own efforts. He famously declared, "Unshakable is the liberation of my mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence."

Later Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions describe the Buddha as a transcendent cosmic principle manifesting through three bodies: the Dharmakaya (Truth Body), which is the nature of ultimate reality beyond form; the Sambhogakaya (Bliss Body), the subtle dimension of enlightened presence accessible to advanced bodhisattvas; and the Nirmanakaya (Emanation Body), in which Buddhas appear in human form in this world. These traditions teach that multiple Buddhas exist in different realms, working to alleviate the suffering of beings.

What does this mean, then, for our own practice? Despite these quite different views of Buddhahood and the ultimate goal, both aim to reveal the nature of reality and support awakening. For me, this inquiry has led to the realization that at this point in my understanding, I simply cannot know which view is ultimately true—or even if that is the right question. Perhaps each framework of understanding serves the unique needs and aspirations of different practitioners.

While some follow one tradition exclusively, others, like me, after being well-established in one practice, draw inspiration from several, finding strength in their shared roots. When asked what I practice, my response is simple: I practice not clinging to anything as 'I' or 'mine,' and then wait to see where that leads.

A Moment Beyond Tradition

Sometimes a single moment can capture the essence of what many words are trying to convey. In the 1970s, during the annual three-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, we hosted Dipa Ma, one of our most revered and beloved teachers. She had extraordinary attainments in vipassana practice and various stages of enlightenment, along with mastery of the various levels of concentration and the siddhis, or powers, which can arise from those practices. When asked what her mind was like, she replied, "There is concentration, peace and love." We all felt that in her presence—a vast emptiness and boundless love.

During that retreat, we also had the great good fortune to receive a visit by H.H. the Sixteenth Karmapa, one of the

foremost Tibetan Buddhist masters of the last century. His Holiness offered a talk and blessings in the meditation hall, seated on a high brocade-covered seat, as is customary for a great lama giving teachings.

After his talk, the Karmapa blessed each of us by touching our heads with a ritual whisk. When Dipa Ma stepped forward, however, he took her head in his hands and touched his forehead to hers, a Tibetan gesture of respect and connection. Although they had never met, there seemed to be an immediate recognition of the vast inner dharma realm they shared.

Though they had each mastered different practices and traditions, the moment conveyed a mutual recognition of boundless emptiness and love at the heart of realization. While I could only imagine the depth of their understanding, that encounter seemed to transcend differences in method and viewpoint—an inspiring aspiration for us all.

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