



February 14, 2023, Tuesday Evening, Living Awake Class

Big Picture Statement of the Dharma Background Supporting Our Practice; Visuddhi Magga, Vipassana, Pure Awareness

Aaron: My blessings and love to you. I am Aaron. Tonight, I'm going to paint a big picture of the dharma background that supports your practice. Starting next class, we're going to move more directly into path of sacred darkness.

When you hear me say "sacred darkness," you might flinch and say, "Darkness! Darkness!" But the darkness and the light are indivisible. They are part of each other. We've worked with a focus on path of sacred light, path of clear light, and I think you've all read or had an opportunity to read my book, Path of Clear Light. The darkness is part of the light and cannot be separated from that light.

Unless we are willing to enter into the darkness, we cannot firmly rest in the light. But we do not enter the darkness as if it had an ultimate reality. We touch into the darkness, knowing that the ultimate reality of darkness is light and understanding that we hold both together.

Our classes in the recent years—the last three year program before this and this Awake class, and everything that Barbara, John, and I teach—come from a merging together of the practices of vipassana as part of the Theravada path and of pure awareness, and also a bringing into that the beautiful Brahma Vihara practices.

I simply want to remind you tonight of how all of this comes together so that you may more fully rest in it as you move into some more challenging areas of meditation.

A number of you were part of the Healing and the Ever-Healed retreat. In that retreat we focused both on the linear path of healing—moving from something which is distorted or broken into the absolute presence of the ever-healed, the ever-perfect—and to know that ever-healed is an ultimate reality because you are not just waking up, you are



awake.

If you don't recognize that you are awake, how can you recognize your readiness for the linear path of awakening? How do we bring them together?

My awakening 600 years ago drew from numerous lifetimes in the Theravada tradition. This is often presented as a more linear path. There is a very specific path described in some of the sutras and in Visuddhi Magga, "Path of Purification". Path—path of purification. One needs purification, and following this path, one arrives in that purification.

But of course, if you were not already radiant and free of distortion, how could there be purification? How could there be ever-healed, the awakened one? We come to what remains after the distortions drop away.

Let's just look a bit at how this goes together. You've heard this from me before. I hope hearing it again will allow it to go deeper in your understanding.

First there is the basic Buddhist path: The Buddha speaks of suffering, the causes of suffering, and the path out of suffering and leading to liberation. For me, as the monk that I was 600 years ago, this is what shaped me. I'm going to discuss that path in a little more detail. But while many, many centuries ago it was seen as a more linear path, also John reminds us that as a monk practicing with Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Chah spoke of the Pali words pu ru, the One Who Knows. As a Theravada monk, this was also an essential part of Ajahn Chah's teaching. The One Who Knows is right there, has always been there.

The book—a massive volume—Visuddhi Magga, "Path of Purification," gives a list of different stages of the path. I'm not going to go through this all, by any means. We would need many classes to do that. It's not the work of this gathering.

We discern conditionality—objects arise out of conditions and pass away. We begin to see better what is path and what is not path, and to understand the three characteristics



in all conditioned experience.

We come into a phase that first we barely understand, and then begin to understand it more deeply from our experience. What does it mean that everything is arising out of conditions and passing away when the conditions cease? What does that mean to our life? That insight becomes more stable.

Noting this through mental noting, we arrive at what is called Immature Knowledge of What is Arising and Passing Away. That is, we sort of get it, not yet completely.

We begin to gain a closer understanding this path is that we're on. Watching objects arise into your experience and pass away when the conditions cease, you become more and more certain that these conditioned objects—in other words, those arisen out of those conditions—that these will pass away. They have no ultimate reality.

With the idea of no ultimate reality, Knowledge of Terror comes up. We're attached; we want something to hold onto. Terror arises about this dissolution.

Then we start to see how we can get caught back into taking non-ultimate realities, to giving them some kind of ultimateness. That next stage, then, is Contemplation of Danger. Not of the danger of a world in which there is nothing to hold onto, but the danger that we could get caught again taking any conditioned thing as solid.

Different phases, and I'm not going through them all. But an important one is Desire for Deliverance. Deep aspiration to continue to the path and find freedom.

Then there are many reflections. Finally, we come to a phase called Equanimity with Formations. Objects arising and passing away with no ultimate reality. And yet, they do arise and they do pass away. We have essentially seen into the voidness of everything on the conditioned realm. If this is true, then what exists?

As I said, I'm not reading these all, but I will have Barbara pass this whole page to Tana to post on that place on the Deep Spring site where optional readings are posted for the class. You're welcome to read as much of this as interests you, or not.



We keep moving through this Theravada path, using vipassana meditation. This is where access concentration comes in, watching objects arise and pass away, arise and pass away.

The word citta is a Pali word for consciousness. Some citta may perceive only the conditioned. Later, those citta open that can perceive unconditioned objects. Now the citta that are capable of perceiving not just conditioned objects but the Unconditioned, those citta begin to open. You have access to the Unconditioned. This is a powerful phase.

Right there with access to the Unconditioned is more fear, because the conditioned world keeps dissolving.

Next comes the stage called Change of Lineage Knowledge. My lineage, your lineage - Change of Lineage Knowledge means that you have finally reached a point where you can agree within your heart the conditioned realm is not going to bring you freedom. As long as you limit yourself to the conditioned realm, there will not be freedom.

But to let go of that conditioned realm, this is the fear that comes up. Everything is dissolving. And some of you have experienced this in your meditation, a point where, as you watch objects arise and pass away, arise and pass away, this terror—the stage I mentioned a minute ago—this terror comes up. There's nothing to hold onto.

The path moves on from there, and I'm not going to go into it in detail. But at this point, your pure awareness practice becomes a very powerful tool. Let's say a powerful reality.

A simple metaphor that some people have found helpful. You are walking with me on a dark, stormy night, and I tell you, "We're walking to the edge of a cliff." You can hear the waves slamming against the cliff face, feel the thunder of their vibration. We get up to the edge of the cliff and I say, "Okay, here we are—jump!" Is there anybody who is going to jump? I think not.



So, we back away from that cliff edge. We walk down a gentle path to a beach at the base of the cliff. It's a sheltered cove. The shoreline juts out, and the waves are hitting out there, but here there's a sheltered cove.

I ask you to walk with me. The water is not terribly cold. We wade out. The cove circles like that, so here you're sheltered from the big surf. Put your hand on the cliff face, wading knee-deep, waist-deep, chest-deep, hand there, the water coming up and going down, but not waves that will overwhelm you. I point out to you, "This is what is at the edge of the cliff. When you jump in, this is what you find."

Can you feel how it takes some of the terror of leaping into the Unconditioned, letting go of the conditioned realm, how it helps give you some deeper sense of trust of the process?

So, in meditation, ahhh.... Just resting in awareness, ahhh... A separate practice from vipassana, ahhh.. And yet, the practices merge.

You start to get a sense of what this "ahhh..." space is, that it's not shaped by conditioned objects arising and passing. What remains beyond the conditioned realm?

Little glimpses of it. Ahh.... Opening to those bits of direct experience of the Unconditioned for which you are ready. Feeling increasingly stable in resting in that spaciousness.

Then, still a very dark night, we climb up to the edge of the cliff again. Meanwhile, the surf has subsided a bit. The waves are not going to slam you into the cliff face, and you've just been swimming in that water. So now, having had a direct experience of what this water is like, we come back up and say, "Okay, everything is arising and passing, arising and passing. Come to the edge, and, if you're ready, you can jump."

There's a deeper sense of trust because you've experienced what will be there. It's in this way that we can move between vipassana and pure awareness practice, the vipassana being essential to help you deeply understand the distinction between



conditioned and unconditioned and how all dharmas, all objects of every sort, arise out of conditions and pass away.

And then, the spaciousness into which they pass. After the wave hits the cliff, where does it go? It's just water.

Pure awareness meditation comes from the Tibetan Dzogchen practice. There are many other teachings of pure awareness through many traditions—Native American, different kinds of native traditions. But one strong opening into it is through the Dzogchen practice.

I'm not sure how long ago, but I'm guessing twenty years ago these Dzogchen teachings were not taught except to practitioners who had been through many, many years of Tibetan training because it was thought that they were too dangerous.

Dangerous, why?

If you deeply perceive that there is only the Unconditioned, then at certain level, your actions cease to have the same kind of consequence, because your actions in the conditioned realm are simply the waves slamming against the cliff. They have no ultimate reality.

One of the concerns shared with me by some of the Western Tibetan teachers was that people would—let me phrase this carefully... Within pure awareness, within the spaciousness of the ultimate, there really is no field of karma. Think about that. Karma exists only a relative level. The fear was that people could step aside from taking responsibility for their choices by simply resting in ultimate awareness.

Now, in the long run, you cannot do that. But this was a fear that people would believe they could. But what was said to me was that many of the Tibetan lamas felt it was time to make these teachings available in the world because the world needs them. The world needs a way to see what's down at the base of the cliff; not to just live in a world of conditions bringing further conditions, bringing further conditions, with eventual end of



awakening, but the ever-present awakened heart in this moment that people can come to through these pure awareness practices.

So, maybe it's twenty years ago, I don't remember exactly how long, but Barbara and John went to the first few month-long pure awareness/Dzogchen retreats (they were called Dzogchen retreats), learning these pure awareness practices and learning how to bring them into and merge them with the more linear practice.

At that first retreat, there were a great many Theravada teachers for whom this was, I would not say new, but somewhat new. It affected people very deeply. I can think of one book, Joseph Goldstein's *One Dharma*, that's very much written as a synthesis of his work in these two practices. Many people began to bring them together to different degrees—not everyone, but some people.

Of course, I had had a chance to practice and study this on the inner planes between that final human lifetime and now. But we could not rush Barbara and John; they had to develop the practice on their own, and enough understanding of it to know how to merge them together—which they now do very beautifully.

So, this is what we've been working with, with you—a deep cherishing of the traditional Theravada path, which is a very pure path to freedom, and a deep embracing of the power of resting in awareness—resting in the one who is awake, which is who and what you are, and seeing how they move back and forth.

As support to this, we bring in the Brahma Viharas, the beautiful practices of loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. And in addition, those practices of forgiveness, gratitude, unconditional love.

Only once these elements are at least accessible to you, in my perception, are you ready to take a deeper look at what I mean by sacred darkness. We don't want to get ahead of ourselves. The path needs to be stable because we want you to feel safe on this path.



When I say “to feel safe,” who feels safe? Not the mundane self that you are but the awakened one that you are. To know that awakened one.

So, you weave together these different strands, as many of you have been doing for a dozen years and more. Coming to a readiness to let go of self-identification with the conditioned self and begin to know yourself as the One Who Knows. The one who is awake. The one who loves. But even that is saying that in too conventional a way, it’s too much doing. The one whose essence is love.

As I have suggested to you repeatedly, this is why you have come. Not to wake up for your own comfort—although it’s pleasant that that will happen—but to know yourself as the essence of awakened heart-mind, the essence of love. And with your deep commitment and intention—and intention is the other piece of this puzzle—the deep intention to be of service to all beings, to hold this space of love and awakening for all beings. Literally, to find yourself on that other shore.

And when you reach that other shore, remember you have just come to the shore. You move in. It expands. We don’t want to merely sit on the beach; we want to get deep into it. What does it mean to live awake? Thus, the essence of this class: waking up and living awake.

It becomes important to know beyond all knowing, to know with certainty the non-duality of light and darkness, of love and fear, of all the seeming opposites, and to know that you, each of you, are the one that can hold that non-duality.

Barbara was reflecting before the class started, how do we get to a point where, for those who don’t know about this, there was an active shooter at Michigan State University, which is just down the road an hour from Barbara, last night, who I believe killed three people and shot a number of others, who are in critical condition.

And then we have the armies breaking in, going across their borders and into another country, wanting power, wanting control. Those who exist in service to self, based in



fear, in greed, in separation. How does this world get past this entrapment of separation and negativity?

Each of you that touches that other shore—and most of you have done so; maybe not with deep understanding—but in your practice, most of you have had some experience of dissolution of self and opened to a deeper sense of what is real, which is non-dual love and interconnection.

This is your platform. You've crossed the deep sea. You've touched the other shore.

Are you then going to get back in your boat and go back to relative reality? Or are you ready to explore deeper on that other shore? Of course you will go back and forth, but the imprint of that other shore on the heart is undissolvable.

I had hoped in these past couple of years to have written the sequel to Path of Clear Light, which would be Path of Sacred Darkness. Given Barbara's need of giving time to support Hal, and for her own care, her own physical and other needs, I've just not been able to write that book yet, but I plan to.

But instead of writing the book now, let's just live it together. Path of sacred darkness is no different than path of sacred light. It is the path of awakening into your true nature as love.

In the coming weeks we'll take this in smaller steps. Guided meditations, some of which we've already done but we'll repeat them. Journeying. Different kinds of steps that can lead us deeper into trusting the truth of your being when you no longer experience yourself as either good or bad, light or dark, this or that. When you see clearly and deeply into the whole pattern of everything arising from conditions and passing away, arising and passing away, and moving into that which remains.

Here is the Buddha nature, the Christ consciousness, the great awakened ones who have gone before us and paved the way.

I am not asking you to have the stature of a Christ or Buddha, because you're still here



in a human body and still trapped at times, but to know that you can move past that entrapment. That as you trust and walk this path, this very beautiful Change of Lineage Knowledge will open before you. The reality is, “I AM awake, and the whole idea of sleep has just been a dream. I never was asleep, but I believed I was, so I became caught in that trap. Now I am waking.” Rubbing the sleep out of the eyes. “I am awakening. I am beginning to know a deeper reality, which is the power of love.” And that you carry that love as your birthright as a human. That you plant those seeds of love into the earth.

This is why you have come, and it is a very walkable and beautiful path, especially with a sangha like this where there’s an opportunity to share your concerns, your confusion, fears, and have wonderful guidance from your teachers and from each other.

I see this as vital, if we are to move past the point where a young man can pick up a gun, go into a building and shoot people he’s never met just because of the darkness in which he is mired. If we are to find freedom from that in this world, it comes from waking up to know your true self and the true self of all beings. If we are to move past the point where a dictator can send armies across a border to kill thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people at his own whim, it comes because you are waking up. And the awakened one that you are knows how to say, “No, we will not do that anymore. Now is the age of living in the light and in the awakened heart.”

To help impart this is a large part of why I came to Barbara 35-some years ago, and I thank you for being willing to walk this path with me. To have the courage to say, “Yes, we are ready”—not to wake up, because that’s the linear Theravada path; to KNOW we are awake. To live that awakenedness. To have the courage to live it because of the very profound intention of service to all beings. Knowing non-duality. Knowing the power of love.

Thank you for hearing me. I look forward to the coming classes in which we will break



this down, give simpler steps, guided meditations. And yet basically, it's done! If it's nonlinear, then it's not this and this—it's done. Wake up! You are awake. Let us live it and bring commitment to knowing that awakened heart and living it into this earth plane, seeding the earth with your love.

Thank you. I am Aaron.