

Martin Aylward

*Evolving Dharma: How Practice Transforms*

Week Three: “Ideology: The Evolution of Why We Practice”

September 17, 2022



Hello, welcome to the third talk in this series. Today we're looking at *nibbana*, the goal of practice, why we practice, and the freedom of being, which is the heart and the ground and the promise and the real possibility, the liberation of dharma practice.

I had great good fortune with my own teachers in that they taught in a way where the liberation of the human being, the living a free life, was right at the heart of most everything they taught and, really, how they conducted their lives. It served as an invitation to me. It was also deeply inspiring to me.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, my first teacher in Thailand, would talk about what he would call liberation for everyone, *nibbana* for everyone. And that was a radical idea in Thailand in the 1980s when deep practice or any hint of possibility to dare to speak about *nibbana* or liberation was seen as esoteric, far away, or belonging to hardcore meditators living in caves. I found that very evocative and inspiring. It was like a personal invitation to me: engage with dharma practice, free your mind, liberate your life.

I've also come across teachers and teachings and traditions where that sense of the aliveness and the open possibility of a free life isn't so front and center. I attended teaching sometimes, particularly in the years I spent practicing in India, where the sense was that all enlightenment is something far away, the work of many lifetimes even. Maybe for some, that takes the pressure off in some way. Maybe I was just impatient, but I felt like I haven't got many lifetimes to practice. That sense of freeness, awakens, liberation—it wasn't so much as wanting that now, but there was a sense of being offered that as a genuine invitation.

If we're looking at the evolution of our practice and understanding over time, we can compare the ideas and the images that we get of freeness. What are those? They come in the form of Buddha images, serene, upright, equanimous, spacious. They may come in the imagery of

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*thangkas*, imagery of clouds and ethereal beings, a liberation that seems cosmic in its nature.

And then we compare it to the life we're meeting in our practice. I'm meeting my restlessness, my confusion, my doubts, my out-of-control desires, my tendency to get resistant or angry or irritable with everything I don't like, and I think, "Oh, dear, it must be very, very, very far away."

But as we settle, and as we were exploring in the previous talk when we spoke about the imminence of awareness, always available, always here, we start to sense a way in which maybe freeness is not far away. Because if it was, it wouldn't be very free. As one of my teachers said to me once, freeness goes in all directions, including the freeness to look at our own unfreeness.

So what does that mean that freeness goes in all directions? I use the term *freeness* rather than freedom. I think of freedom as a kind of legal status. We have various social freedoms, we have freedoms enshrined by law, even if some of them are being eroded rather alarmingly. But freeness isn't a state. It's a quality, a quality of freeness that runs through life. The Buddha describes liberation as the taste of freeness.

We start off with these ideas and images, the golden Buddhas, the *thangkas*, the idea of the end of greed, hatred, and delusion, the resolution of all suffering, the idea of suffering being cut off like a palm stump. So then if there's any hint of reactivity here, that seems to be the evidence of the absence of freeness or liberation.

But as we go along, we might start to have the sense that freeness cannot be anywhere else. It can't be out there waiting for me to catch up to it. Because the me that's catching up to it, all the while I'm trying to catch up to it, is just doing more of that identifying with the material, more of the pulling or the resisting and more filled with ideas and delusions.

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So as we settle into things, we may dare to imagine and to start to taste that freeness is here as a kind of open invitation for us to rest into it. We start to notice that the everyday stuff of our experience like our breath is actually happening freely. We have the rhetoric that says "I'm breathing," but actually, am I? I don't turn out to be very good at breathing. I easily forget. But fortunately, my breathing isn't dependent on me remembering or forgetting. Our breath is happening freely. And then all these other bodily processes like aging are just happening freely. It's all happening in accordance with the nature of things: the way my heart is beating, the way my nails and hair grow and fall out. It's all happening by itself.

We start to taste the way this life inherently is conforming to the free unfolding of things. Most inherently, life is a freely unfolding process, and everything that seems to get in the way of that—my moments of doubt, fear, resistance, obsession, etc.—are just momentary obscurations within that freeness. In fact, they're not even obscurations. My doubt, my fear, my resistance, my confusion are also freely unfolding phenomena, part of the texture of this freely unfolding life.

Whereas at the beginning, we might imagine nibbana, liberation, to be far off, then we start to realize that this moment, this experience, this life is the ground in which that freeness gets met and metabolized and lived. We start to taste that freeness as a feeling of most essentially no problem. There is no problem anywhere. This can be a controversial sense. It can offend one's sensibilities at first.

What about this and that? What about all the endless, numberless problems of the world? What about my personal difficulties and challenges? What about my various relational difficulties and challenges? What about social difficulties and challenges? What about global and environmental and ecological problems and challenges? Yes, they all need attention. They all need an endless amount of care and attention. They need us to be committed to all the ways human beings act selfishly and unkindly and cruelly and abusively and unthinkingly towards each other and

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towards the world around us. But while we're tending to the myriad numberless problems of the world, the recognition is that there is no problem.

It's a seeming paradox, but one can attend to all the problems of the world with the inner feeling that there is no problem anywhere. There's this freely unfolding process. As in this body, as in the world. On the one hand, everything's constantly going wrong. Health is failing; vitality comes and goes; one day one feels bright and breezy, and the next day one feels dull and lethargic. One day, the world seems like a hopeful place; the next day, the world seems like a hopeless place. So all of that needs attention. Body needs attention. Mind needs attention. Energy levels need attention. Food and clothing needs attention. Our relationships need attention. Our world needs care and attention.

We might imagine where we need to get to. Internally, we might call that nibbana. Externally, we tend to imagine it as utopia, the place where we should get to. So the collapse of any other nibbana, the collapse of any imagined utopia, is the capacity to meet the stuff of life right here and know there is no problem, and moreover, there cannot ever be any problem.

Freeness of one's being—and where this practice points us to—is that capacity to move through life with the deep, quiet, wide-open conviction of knowing there's no problem anywhere. Therefore, one has one's awakensness and one's kindness and one's attention to offer freely wherever it's needed.

Aside from ideas that you've either inherited or ideas from the tradition or ideas from your reading or ideas developed out of your practice, aside from ideas about nibbana or enlightenment or liberation, what's your relationship to problems? How might you orient to life in a way that puts down the problems and frees up the capacity to engage, to respond, to meet everything freely just like this?