Aversion and Insight

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Whether you're here for six weeks or three months, we are well into the retreat. And I think most of you have seen by now that, especially on a long retreat like this one, the practice doesn't unfold in a kind of steady progression towards more calm, more peace, more equanimity.

There are cycles in our retreat. It gets smooth and then it gets challenging, and then it's smooth again and then it gets challenging again. Within these cycles, one frequent component is the mind state of aversion. And that's what I'd like to talk about tonight.

As you're all aware by now, aversion comes up a lot in our practice, possibly more for some than others. There is a sense that we each have our own proclivities, our own favorite challenges. Some of us tend more towards the aversion side, some more towards the greed side, some more towards the delusion side, but we all have all three of these aspects in our experience. I'd like to focus tonight on how aversion comes up for us.

We react to physical pain with aversion. We react to what other people do, sometimes the food. We react to our own states of mind. These reactions can be obvious or subtle. Sometimes they might be as clear cut as anger or fear, or sometimes they might be more subtle—just a subtle wishing that things were a little bit different. You're basically with your experience, able to be mindful, and there's just this subtle sense of "it was better yesterday."

Sometimes with aversion—I think Carol referred to this in a way the other day—we think we need to get rid of the aversion in order to practice, that somehow the aversion is in our way, or any of the hindrances are in our way of practice. We think, "Well, yes, okay, I can be mindful of the aversion, but when that passes, that's when the real practice will begin." It can feel like second-class practice if we're working with states of aversion or any state of difficulty.

What I hope to convey this evening is that it's not a second-class practice. In fact, very deep insight can come directly through being mindful of aversion.

Aversion is a reaction to something that we don't like. Typically that something is an unpleasant experience of some kind. I'm going to read you a section from the suttas that I referred to in the question and answer the other morning.

The Buddha says: "The uninstructed worldling"—that's someone who is a normal person—"the uninstructed worldling feels a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, and a neither painful nor pleasant feeling. The instructed noble disciple too feels a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, and a neither painful

nor pleasant feeling. Therein, what is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed worldling?"

He goes on to say: "When the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments. He weeps, beating his breast, and becomes distraught. He feels two feelings, a bodily feeling and a mental feeling. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, and then they would strike him immediately afterwards with a second dart. So that man would feel the feeling caused by two darts. So too, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by painful feeling, he feels two feelings, a bodily feeling and a mental one. Being contacted by that painful feeling, he harbors aversion towards it."

Then he goes on to talk about the instructed noble disciple: "When the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, he does not sorrow, grieve, or lament. He does not weep, beating his breast, and become distraught. He feels one feeling, a bodily one, not a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, but they would not strike him immediately afterwards with a second dart. So that man would feel a feeling caused by one dart only. So too, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, he feels one feeling, a bodily one, not a mental one. Being contacted by that painful feeling, he harbors no aversion towards it."

Kind of amazing to think about, isn't it? No aversion towards unpleasant experience.

This story that the Buddha is telling is essentially a story of reactivity. We react to unpleasant experience. Life will give us a certain amount of unpleasant experience—that is a given, in a sense. That unpleasant experience may be actual painful bodily experience. It might come because of the ending of something pleasant. It might come from having something pleasant and fearing its loss. And typically we react to this unpleasantness by wanting to get rid of it, by clinging to things that are pleasant.

For example, as I mentioned the other morning, if you injure yourself, if you damage your body in some way, there will be painful feelings.

That painful feeling is simply part of the way the body is designed. It's designed to produce painful feeling when we're injured. But we don't typically just feel a painful feeling. We react to it. "How stupid that was of me not to see that the pavement was uneven!" And we fall down. So we berate ourselves.

We don't even stop there. That kind of berating ourselves is what we might call the second arrow, the second dart. We add a third, a fourth, a fifth dart. We're angry at ourselves for being self-critical. We feel sad for feeling angry at ourselves. This can go on and on and on. This cycle can continue, this cycle of reactivity, stabbing. It's essentially as if we are stabbing ourselves with multiple darts.

Paying attention to this reactivity, paying attention to this aversion with mindfulness, begins to open a space around our experience and our reaction to it. And this is what I'd like to explore this evening.

Aversion seems to have some of its roots, at least, in our biology—just the fact that our physical body

produces painful experience. Very naturally, we want to protect ourselves. The body and mind seem to be designed to protect ourselves. So there's a very natural wanting to avoid unpleasant experience. Sometimes it almost feels hardwired, but it isn't hardwired. It's possible to experience unpleasant experience without that quick movement to reactivity, without the pushing away. As my colleague Gil Fronsdal sometimes says, pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.

Beyond this sense of physical survival, beyond the aversion that comes into play around protecting our body, it seems also that we have a need to protect our identities. I was reading a book about how neuroscientists understand the self to be a construct in the brain. One of the things I found interesting was that as the brain got more sophisticated, the representation of our physical body in the brain became more sophisticated. And essentially, the patterns that protect us—the fear, the aversion—are designed to protect that representation more than they're actually designed to protect the physical body.

This, I think, is how our minds make the leap to identities, and how the sense of identity becomes something that really needs to be protected. We cling to our identities. They're very near and dear to us. And if they're threatened, if our identities become threatened, it's as if our physical being is threatened. This kind of aversion can arise because our sense of identity is threatened. "They don't have a right to do that!"

Aversion can function sometimes as a signal that something needs to be attended to. This is important, I think. Partly coming from the roots it has in our biology, aversion can be a signal that something needs to be taken care of. It's well worth paying attention to aversion.

As we turn mindful attention to aversion itself, without the agenda of wanting to get rid of it—which is just more aversion—the aversion itself becomes the real practice. When there is aversion arising in our minds, that is the real practice. That is what we are encouraged to pay attention to. The first noble truth, which Sally talked about the other night, is to understand suffering. When aversion is happening, there is suffering in the mind. So this aversion is meant to be understood.

When we are turning our attention to understand aversion, it no longer functions as what we could call a hindrance. When aversion is not seen, it is hindering our practice. It's hindering our ability to be present for experience. But when we see aversion, it no longer hinders us. And even in the midst of observing and exploring, even in the midst of understanding aversion, deep insight can arise.

One of the first steps to understanding our aversion is to begin to recognize it in our experience. Aversion has many flavors. After hearing a talk by Carol at one point, I decided to make a list of all the ones I was familiar with. So I'm going to read that list: fear, anger, bitterness, resentment,

hostility, dislike, rage, irritation, annoyance, worry, hatred, distrust, cruelty, discontent, frustration, aversion, dissatisfaction. Then I went to the thesaurus and got some more: loathing, disapproval, disgust, fury, disrespect, disparagement, contempt, humiliation, unkindness, meanness, spitefulness, disdain,

disquiet, anxiety, apprehension, dread, distress. Many, many flavors—from the subtle to the obvious.

Boredom can also be a manifestation of aversion. It might simply be a kind of disconnect, a manifestation of delusion, but it can also be a manifestation of aversion where what's happening in our present moment experience is just not quite what we'd like it to be, so we move into boredom.

Impatience can also be an expression of aversion. It can be an expression of greed, as in being impatient for something wonderful to happen—that happens to me occasionally. When I was a kid, I definitely was impatient for the holidays to arrive. But more often in my own experience, I've seen impatience around wanting something unpleasant to be over. Even something as simple as brushing my teeth—I've got better things to do than brush my teeth. So impatience can also be a manifestation of aversion.

Beginning to recognize your own familiar flavors of aversion can help you recognize it as it arises in your mind. It's very powerful to simply recognize this state—just a simple recognition. It starts to create some spaciousness around the experience.

In the very early days of my practice, before I had any real meditation instruction, I had read a book that talked about being mindful of your experience. I didn't really understand what mindfulness was, but I was willing to try anything because I pretty much felt like I'd hit bottom. Anger was ruling my life and making me non-functional at times. I would find myself sitting in front of the computer, frozen with rage going through my mind.

So I decided I would start observing anger in my experience—I had read this book and decided to try. Only I didn't know what it meant to be mindful. I hadn't had any instructions at this point. Somebody had sent me this book. I was in the middle of the South Pacific, in the Peace Corps. This was all I had, this book.

I remember the very first time I remembered that I had decided I would pay attention to this anger. I was sitting there, just fuming, and at some point the memory arose. I remembered, "Oh yeah, I said I was going to pay attention to this." At that point there was so much anger in my mind that all I could do was say, "Yeah, I'm angry. This is really unpleasant. This doesn't feel good. What am I supposed to do with this anyway?" That was about all I could do with it.

After some seconds of sitting there in that space, I thought, "Well, I guess I go back to work. I don't know what I do with this." In retrospect, even that very first time, I see that it gave me enough space—just that recognition. "Oh yeah, I'm angry." Just that recognition gave me enough space to be able to go back to work.

I kept going with this over the course of several months, just noticing anger when it arose. What I began to notice and recognize was that, just through the simple willingness to recognize anger—not even having all the tools of mindfulness that you all have—the mindfulness began to recognize the pattern of anger earlier in the cycle. The mind didn't spin out quite so much anymore. I saw the direct benefits of mindfulness in that I was no longer ruled by the anger, and it wasn't taking me to that non-functional

space anymore. Just the simple recognition. That simple recognition is very powerful.

It's also very important within our practice, particularly on retreat, to recognize when there is aversion in your relationship to your experience. If there's a struggle happening in your meditation, check your relationship with your experience. There may be some kind of aversion happening—it may also be greed or delusion. But check and see: is there some kind of aversion hidden in the way that we're attending to experience? It's really prevalent.

I've heard it in many of your interviews—paying attention even to something not terribly challenging, just some small pain or discomfort, noticing it, able to be with it, not particularly difficult to be with it, and yet there's a very subtle sense of: "I wish this wasn't here." That very subtle sense, that quiet "I wish this wasn't here," is a form of aversion and needs to be recognized, opened to. That may be all that's needed—simply acknowledging, "Yes, there's aversion here. There's a little bit of this not-wanting happening in my mind."

Recognizing that aversion is happening is crucial. In working with aversion, in working with this challenging mind state, it's really helpful to bring a sense of acceptance, allowing, kindness, and compassion to the state of mind. We turn to recognize this experience in the mind and body in the present moment.

One key to this exploration of aversion is turning the attention away from the thing that we are averse to. There's often something in our experience or in our environment that is triggering the aversion. It may be the way somebody is taking their food in the dining hall. It may be the way somebody is walking. It may be something happening in your own body. In working with aversion, it's helpful to take the attention out of the thing that is the trigger for the aversion and turn the attention to the experience of the aversion itself—taking the attention out of that external object and placing it, turning it back towards the mind and body. How does it feel in the mind and body? Aversion feels like this.

With aversion, often both the aversion and the thing that we don't like are unpleasant. This is essentially the teaching of the two darts. There's something that we're responding to, and that's unpleasant. And then the aversion is unpleasant. So it creates a kind of positive feedback loop. Because of this, because they're both unpleasant, the effect seems to be multiplicative. It multiplies the intensity of the unpleasantness when we react to an unpleasant experience with aversion.

Because of this dynamic, attending to aversion can be difficult—we see how unpleasant it is. But we do start to see, as we bring our mindfulness to the aversion, that what we're experiencing, the unpleasantness that's experienced with mindfulness, is somehow less out of control than it is when the aversion is just running on its own. And we begin to see that this kind of suffering we experience around observing the aversion, the unpleasantness that we experience, is what some people call the suffering that leads to the end of suffering.

We begin to see that being mindful of our aversion gives us a pathway towards freedom from suffering. And as we see this, as we see the benefit that it brings to be mindful of our aversion, it's almost like the aversion starts to trigger the mindfulness. At least that's been my experience—that if any kind of difficulty begins to arise in my experience, mindfulness is pretty much right there. It becomes a mindfulness bell. It becomes a very strong incentive for mindfulness.

When we're experiencing aversion, as many of you have seen in your own experience, there's often a lot of thinking present. Not always, but very often there's a lot of thinking: "Why did they do that? They shouldn't have done that. I was right about that. They were wrong. That was a really unpleasant thing that they did." We can get lost in the narrative, the story, the thoughts around the aversion. It's really helpful to not put the attention there. Turn the attention towards the bodily experience. How is this aversion manifesting in the body? Aversion is a mental state, but it does create bodily experience. Notice the immediacy of the emotion in the body. Anger might feel like tightness and heat. Fear might feel like contraction in the abdomen or tightness in the throat.

Bringing our attention to the physical sensations helps us to let go of that narrative, and the narrative itself is one of the fuels for the pattern. Turning our attention away from the narrative and towards the bodily experience gives us a way to let go of the fuel. The bodily experience is a result, an effect of the manifestation of the emotion. And turning our attention towards that can be a way for us to simply allow it to flow in our experience as opposed to continuing to churn it up.

Turning attention to the sensations in the body, turning our attention to the physical sensations—it's really helpful in doing this practice to be very clear that what you're paying attention to is physical experience, not mental experience. For instance, if you are noticing that there's fear and you're paying attention to the contraction in your abdomen, know with the mindfulness—if you're using the noting practice, this becomes easier in a way.

Know that the mindfulness is observing physical experience, not the fear itself. So if you're using the noting, you could note "contraction, contraction" as opposed to "fear, fear." It seems like a fine point, but this is actually more important than you might think. It serves a couple of purposes.

First, it helps us to distinguish, to disentangle from the aversion, because the physical experience is not the aversion—it's a physical manifestation. And the other thing is it helps to clarify the mindfulness. We know at the moment what we are paying attention to is the physical experience, not the mental experience.

This has actually been quite important in my own practice. On one retreat here, I was waiting for an interview, and often, as I think many of you have also had the experience, before the interview I was experiencing anxiety. So I was sitting there waiting for the interview and noting: anxiety, anxiety, anxiety is happening. And this interview before me happened to go on for quite a long time, so I got to pay attention to this for a really long time. I was just noting—anxiety, anxiety, anxiety—and it didn't change much.

This actually kind of surprised me, because by this point in the retreat, often if I really clearly met something with mindfulness, it began to shift and change. So I got interested in the fact that it wasn't particularly changing, and I began to pay more attention to the physical manifestation of the experience in the body. The body was experiencing a kind of quivering—the whole body was quivering. And as I connected to that quivering experience directly, letting go of the label "anxiety," I realized that what was happening was rapture, not anxiety. The situation had fooled me, in a sense. The context of where I was, having experienced anxiety in that situation many times, had created an assumption.

And so this attending directly to the physical sensations can actually help us clarify what's really happening for us. If we have assumptions about what's happening, if we assume that it's anxiety or some other experience, that can almost become a self-fulfilling prophecy. So just connecting with the physical experience, just connecting with it, noticing that directly.

Since the kind of connection between aversion—what we react to is the unpleasantness; there's the unpleasantness and then the aversion is the response to the unpleasantness—it's really helpful to pay attention to unpleasant experiences. On one retreat, Carol was sitting up here giving a dharma talk about aversion. One line that I still remember from that talk was: "If you're experiencing aversion, there's something unpleasant in your experience that's not been noticed."

This is actually interesting. When we're experiencing aversion, sometimes we're not actually aware of what it is we are reacting to. This can be a very interesting exploration. When there's aversion happening, see if you can recognize what it is that's unpleasant in your experience, what you're responding to.

Not long after that talk that Carol gave, I was doing walking meditation in the walking room out here. It was pretty crowded in the room. We were doing walking and we were kind of close to each other. Then somebody came up and slipped in between me and the person next to me. The aversion just surged. I thought, okay, there's aversion, so what's unpleasant here in my experience? I had a sense that it wasn't so much just that the person had come in close, but that there was something about this particular person that was bothering me.

So I began exploring my sense doors. The person wasn't particularly unpleasant to look at. There wasn't any particular unpleasant smell. They weren't bumping into me, so there wasn't any unpleasant physical contact. I just kept walking. I ruled out all the sense doors. There wasn't anything unpleasant in my physical sense experience. I thought, well, it must be something in my mind. But I hadn't really seen it—I hadn't seen what it was.

So I thought, okay, I'll just keep an eye out for thoughts, things going on in my mind while I'm doing this walking meditation and feeling the aversion. At some point, doing the walking, I didn't see many thoughts at first. Then this thought came up: "He's weird." Oh, there's a thought. And I still didn't quite connect the aversion to that thought. But I just kept walking. And then the next thought that came up was: "He's walking in bare feet and it's freezing cold out." This was my justification for the weirdness.

So I saw this whole thing. And as I actually saw that, what I realized was that I was averse to an experience in my mind. I was averse to something happening in my own mind.

It was so clear to me that this was a construct in the mind, something I was averse to. And as I saw that, the entire thing fell apart. In the very next pass, there was spontaneous metta toward this person.

So exploring for that unpleasant feeling tone—it can actually be in our ideas more often than you might think. What is the unpleasantness we're actually responding to?

One evening at my home, I was having some insomnia. Often when I have insomnia, what I do is meditate. So I had gotten up to meditate, and I was in my meditation posture when I heard this very slight tapping sound. It was the middle of the night, probably half an hour or so into my meditation, and I heard this very quiet tapping. The experience was that the hearing, the sound itself, was unpleasant. I didn't like it. Just noticing that unpleasantness, noticing hearing as unpleasant, I kept meditating.

The next time the tapping came up—it was kind of intermittent—I noticed a contraction in the body when the tapping came. And the contraction was unpleasant, so I noticed that. I noticed the contraction. I noticed the unpleasantness of the contraction. Then at one point when the tapping came back, I noticed a very quick burst of fear. And the fear was definitely unpleasant.

Then when I noticed the tapping the next time, having observed and worked with the fear a little bit—it wasn't a strong fear, but it was there—the next time the tapping came back, I realized that the tapping itself was not unpleasant. It was actually even slightly pleasant, just this quiet little tapping. Again, reacting to something in the mind. Very interesting. The unpleasantness wasn't in the sense experience. The unpleasantness was in the mind, the reaction in the mind.

Our strongest patterns, our habits of mind—the ones that really bite us, that grip us, that come back over and over again—sometimes seem to come out of nowhere, as if they're somehow lurking in our subconscious, just ready to spring up. We have this sense sometimes of these very deep ruts in our minds.

Observing strong patterns in my own experience, something I have really come to appreciate is that even though these patterns are deeply conditioned—we've practiced them a lot, and there are many causes and conditions from our past that lead us to react in a certain way—in a sense, there are kinds of ruts in our mind. We've practiced a pattern over and over and over again so that the neurological explanation is that when we practice a pattern a lot, the nerves in the brain say, "Well, this is a really important pattern. I'd better shore this one up." So when we practice something a lot, a particular kind of reactivity, the pattern gets very ingrained in the brain.

In a sense, those patterns are there in the brain, and yet if we're not activating that particular pattern, it's not happening. And one thing I've seen in my experience, over and over again—I've seen this enough to have a deep sense of confidence in it—is that when we are experiencing a habitual pattern, a very strong habitual pattern, it is being created in the present moment. The suffering of that pattern, the arising of

that experience is happening in the present moment because of causes that are arising in the present moment.

For example, I have had a very strong pattern around feeling like I'm a failure at practice. Is this familiar to any of you? I would see this come up over and over again in my practice. At one point, I was sitting a three-month course here, and my room was in the gym, which is just below the Catskills. I went downstairs one afternoon and walked through the door. I just pushed the door open in the gym, and I actually watched the construction of the pattern of "I'm a failure" happen as I pushed the door open.

What happened in my mind was that a memory arose of some days before when I had been going through that door in a really concentrated state. Having seen that memory, my mind immediately compared my present state to that state and found it wanting. Not as concentrated as I was two or three days ago. You're a failure.

I could clearly see that there was a trigger, something happening in the present moment. A thought arose in the present moment that there was a reaction to. So I began getting interested in these triggers. When this pattern came up, I was clear that there was something happening in the present moment. It wasn't just some pattern waiting to spring up—although it can be at times.

I want to restate this because it's really important: while there may be conditions in the past that incline us towards particular habits or patterns of mind, the experience of that habit—the re-arising of a pattern like "you're a failure" or "I hate myself" or "I'm depressed," whatever our favorite pattern might be—the arising of it happens in the moment. There are causes in the moment that make that pattern happen. Everything you need to know about that pattern is happening in the present moment.

It's not actually necessary with our mindfulness practice to go back and dig and think about why we are this way. Why do I feel like I'm a failure? Oh, it must have to do with when I was a kid in school and all the kids teased me. Thinking about that is not so helpful in our mindfulness practice. But noticing what's happening in the moment as the pattern arises—that is very helpful. We begin to see the conditions, the causes in the moment for that pattern to come into being. And by witnessing this with mindfulness, these patterns begin to slowly, slowly, slowly unravel.

This kind of recognition—my seeing that thought arise, followed by the comparing, followed by the response of feeling like a failure—was watching cause and effect happen in the mind. This is insight, direct insight into the unfolding, impersonal nature of our experience, right in the midst of observing aversion.

Sometimes when experience is neutral, another place where strong habits can come into being emerges. I find that when experience is neutral, it's almost as if our neural circuits are just wandering around to see where they can hook onto something. So I've often noticed that when things start to get really neutral, some of my strongest patterns can arise in just a split second.

I began getting interested in how this happens. Again, I saw some of the triggers at work. On one retreat at Spirit Rock, I was doing walking meditation and had moved into a space where quite a bit of neutral was happening. I had heard enough dharma talks by this point to have the idea that when it starts to get really neutral, it might mean something good is going to happen. So I started leaning in, waiting. Sometimes I would notice this waiting, just recognize, "Oh, waiting is happening." Other times it would slip by unnoticed.

What I saw was that in this space of neutral, with that waiting for something really good to happen, when nothing really good happened, my pattern—"you're a failure"—came up. On this particular retreat, my mindfulness was clear enough that I had to laugh. It amused me that out of nothing, my mind could create this pattern of "I'm a failure."

Looking at neutral can be an interesting place to watch where our particular forms of strong habits arise, whether they are greed or aversion. Whatever your strong habits are, looking in that field of neutral can be a very interesting place to see how our minds construct these patterns in the moment.

Sometimes these states of aversion can get overwhelming. Sometimes the aversion can be stronger than our ability to be mindful. So it can be helpful to have some skillful means for working with states like this. This can happen at any time—it may happen in the middle of a long retreat, or it may happen at home in your daily life.

One thing I found particularly helpful in my own experience, when a pattern arises that—in my case, the pattern I was observing was anger. Anger was my favorite. When anger would come up around a particular situation, what I found helpful, after realizing that when I tried to bring mindfulness to that experience it sucked me in—the anger was stronger than my ability to be mindful of it—was to recognize that it wasn't so helpful to try to be mindful as long as that anger had the upper hand.

So what I began doing was turning my attention to something neutral in my experience. I turned my attention, in this case, to my feet. Often it seemed that my pattern of anger was arising when I was walking, so I would simply put my attention on my feet on the ground, allowing that anger to be there without pushing it away.

This kind of redirecting of attention needs to be done skillfully. It can't be done with the sense of "I can't feel this, this is bad, I can't feel this anger." It needs to be done really gently, more as a "not now." The way I did this with my own anger, I initially had a conversation with it: "I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger. In the meantime, I'm going to put my attention on my feet." Eventually that got collapsed to simply "not now"—a very gentle way of redirecting my attention to my feet.

This was really helpful. This pattern unfolded over the course of months. What I saw, essentially, was that pattern of anger arising less frequently in my experience.

Until one day I recognized, wow, I haven't felt that in a long time. And it was gone. I didn't believe it. I

thought, where did it go? Even bringing the person up in my mind didn't create the anger. And this all unfolded simply by doing that gentle letting go, gentle putting aside. So that approach can also be very powerful. We don't actually have to confront these things directly. It's more the not engaging, the not entwining—that's what's most important. And for me at that time, not entwining meant putting my attention someplace else.

Sometimes people ask me, "Well, how about the breath? How about if I put my attention on the breath?" If you find that works for you, great. But I often find that with strong emotions—many of these strong emotional experiences are felt physically in the realm of the torso. And if you're paying attention to your breath in the area of the torso, sometimes that can just draw you right back into the experience. So I found putting my attention somewhere in the periphery of my body—my feet, my hands, perhaps sound—was very helpful. Explore for yourselves what works. You could also redirect to metta, if that is a practice that really resonates for you. That is the traditional antidote to aversion, bringing metta into the mind. In my own experience, I found that I was so averse to doing metta that it wasn't helpful for me. So I just let that go and put my attention on neutral experience instead.

Something that has come as a surprise to me in my own practice—but having now seen it several different times, I've begun to appreciate it—is that sometimes aversive mind states can be a reaction to wholesome states of mind. We can be averse to the feeling of love, the feeling of generosity, the feeling of happiness—believe it or not. I've seen this enough in my own mind to recognize it.

When we're experiencing aversion, sometimes we have this sense or notion that there's this complex of stuff happening, and everything in there must be unskillful, unwholesome, and what we need to do is get the scalpel out and cut out the whole thing and get rid of it. What I've begun to recognize in my own experience is that sometimes aversion can be masking a wholesome state.

I'll give an example from my experience. On one retreat, I was noticing depression arising pretty frequently, especially while I was walking. This was in Burma at the Shwe Oo Min Monastery, and at that monastery there's an evening period where people walk together in pairs or threes, and talking is allowed. I would particularly find the depression arising when I noticed people talking together. I came up with some idea about exclusion from when I was a kid in high school, feeling left out, and that's why the depression was arising. But I'd had enough experience to realize that's not so helpful. I don't actually know that—it's just an idea. So let's just observe this depression. Let's see what's happening.

I began observing it, and I spent quite a bit of time noticing resistance to the depression first—that there was depression and some resistance to it. So noticing that resistance. At some point I began to see deep sensations in the area of the heart, this contracting feeling, an unpleasant contraction around the heart.

During one sitting, finally, after several weeks of watching this, observing this, I felt the sensation of this contraction just completely not resisted at all—just completely not resisted, this feeling in the area of the heart. And it got big. This feeling of almost painful contraction just grew and grew. It was easy to let that

happen because there was no resistance. It grew and grew and got really big. And then it flipped into metta. The next thought in my mind, after this beautiful expansive feeling of suffusing metta, was: "This is stupid, this is sappy, this is corny." I recognized in that moment that I had some resistance to that quality of metta.

Having recognized that, I didn't actually see a direct connection between that kind of reaction to the metta and the depression. But having seen it, the depression stopped happening. I'm not saying I was living from then on in this beautiful expansive state of metta. I realized, wow, I've got some work to do here.

But I've seen this happen more than once—that underneath some kind of aversive state of mind can be a very beautiful state of mind. By going in and through and not resisting, we may open to something really beautiful.

Sometimes we hear that when concentration is strong, the hindrances are at bay. Concentration is strong, so I'm not going to be experiencing aversion. And then we hear that concentration is needed for insight to arise. We put these together and think, "If I'm experiencing aversion, there's no way I can have insight. I can be with my aversion, but there's no way I'm going to learn anything here. The learning has to happen later when my mind is completely balanced and equanimous. That's when the insight will happen."

Well, I've seen in my own experience that when we can be with our aversive states without resistance, deep insight can happen.

I'll tell you one more story from my own practice. On a three-month course—this was my self-hatred retreat. Not that it was the only time I ever experienced self-hatred, but it came up a lot on this retreat. I got to see it from so many different angles. It would come, it would go, and I would see it when it came. Initially, there was definitely this sense of, "Well, okay, I guess this is my self-hatred retreat," but I didn't really trust at that point the depth of insight that could come from really just meeting this kind of experience. So it was kind of like, "Okay, well, I guess there's not going to be any deep insight here, but I guess I'll be with my self-hatred." Over and over again, just working with it, working with it, working with it.

Then one night in the hall, Joseph was doing a question and answer session, and he talked about a pattern he'd had where he got really stuck. He came up with this tool for himself that seemed very helpful when he got really stuck. It was what he called a "double noting." He would note the contact of the thing he was reacting to, and then the feeling tone. For him it was lust, so he would note, "Contact pleasant, contact pleasant." The double note seemed to really bring him right into the experience, make it a little bit easier to just be right with what was happening.

Having heard that, I was leaving the hall, walking up the little stairs out into the cloakroom. As I took those steps, I felt the self-hatred descend. I felt powerless over it. It just came crashing in. But my mindfulness was pretty clear. I went back to my room and thought, "Okay, I'm just going to be with this."

I started using that double noting Joseph had talked about. Whenever I saw the mind wavering towards even the subtlest thought—"You're no good, you're a failure, I hate you, you're a bad person"—whatever thought, even just the slightest movement towards it, I would note, "Contact unpleasant. Contact unpleasant."

In the process of this, at some moment, I heard people coming back from the late-night sitting. I was sitting in my room, and I thought, "It's ten o'clock. Time to go to bed." But something in me said no—I'm just going to stay here with this. It felt like something was happening. Just "contact unpleasant, contact unpleasant."

At some moment in that seeing, the mindfulness just completely saw the arising of this pattern of self-hatred. I can't even describe to you how it saw that. But what it saw in that moment was: this is just a construct of the mind. It's just a thought. Seeing that—basically the emptiness of that thought, that it's just a thought—the very next moment, mind and body were flooded with bliss. Split second from self-hatred to bliss.

There was the subtlest feeling of "Oh, never again." Then came a recognition: "Oh no, this insight too is impermanent." And the bliss moved into more of a balanced equanimity.

I didn't really trust or believe in that moment that this had uprooted the pattern of self-hatred. And it hadn't. But it was a couple of years before I experienced self-hatred again. And when I began seeing it, it was the subtlest forms—just little thoughts.

You're no good. And there was no belief in those thoughts anymore.

So that moment of observing that pattern of self-hatred, deeply, deeply cut into that pattern, radically transformed my relationship to myself.

This happened through the willingness to be with the aversion. When aversion is happening, our path is being with the aversion. And truly, attending to these states with mindfulness, with compassion, with kindness, can lead us towards some very deep insights and freedom.

So let's sit for a few moments.

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