The Ordinary That Transforms

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 52:05

My name is Andrea Fella, and I've been practicing Vipassana meditation for about ten years now. I quickly got into intensive retreat practice. In the past ten years, I've sat a number of three-month retreats at IMS and a number of long retreats in Burma. At one point, I ordained as a nun in Burma. So I really love the long retreat practice, but I also have a love for daily life practice, which is how my practice began in the first place.

I've also been involved in the service aspect, primarily through being a retreat manager, both at Spirit Rock and currently for a retreat that we hold in Burma in January. It's an interesting retreat taught jointly by a Burmese meditation teacher and two Western teachers—a lovely three-week retreat in the Sagin Hills in Burma. I began teaching in Redwood City about three years ago. Gil Fronsdal is my main mentor, and he asked me to start teaching. So I primarily teach in Redwood City at the IMC Center there, and I teach retreats, daylongs, and classes.

Often when we think about our meditation, we focus on the calm, the bliss, the peaceful states that emerge in our practice. That kind of experience comes to the forefront for us. But what I'd like to talk about tonight is something a little more ordinary. Mindfulness itself is a very ordinary quality. Our experience throughout our day is very ordinary. So I'd like to explore these ordinary qualities of our life that can transform us.

Mindfulness itself is a very ordinary quality of mind. It's nothing obscure. It's nothing rarefied. It's a very simple quality of mind that we experience from the time we're children, really. A working definition of mindfulness is an awareness of what is happening while it's happening. Now, a form of awareness happens all the time, and that's not necessarily mindfulness, because we're aware all the time even if we're not particularly conscious of what's happening while it's happening.

For example, a number of years ago, I was talking to a friend and asked her about the sound of mourning doves. I said, "You know the sound that mourning doves make when they fly away, don't you?" She said, "No, I don't know that sound." I said, "Oh, I'm sure you do. You've heard it hundreds of times. The next time you ride your bike down the road, pay attention when the mourning dove flies away, and you'll recognize that sound." The next day she came back to me and said, "You're right, I know that sound." But she hadn't really been conscious of it in the moment. That's the difference between awareness and mindfulness.

Mindfulness is like the air we breathe, actually. It happens to us all the time throughout our day. It's not something we even actually have to try to do. It will happen to us in brief moments all the time

throughout the day. For example, if you are washing your hands and you put them in the water and it's really hot, you know that it's hot when it's happening. There's a moment of mindfulness there, of recognition: "Oh, this is hot." That kind of thing happens all the time to us. But we don't typically pay attention to the fact that it has happened, that we are aware of what's happening while it's happening.

Right now, how hard is it for you to be aware of the fact that I'm speaking while I'm speaking? It's really quite simple. Once I've called your attention to it, it's right there. Or the pressure of your body on the chair—it's right there once I bring your attention to it. Or your feet on the floor. It's a very simple, very obvious quality of mind. But we don't usually recognize it as a valuable quality of mind. In fact, it just goes right by. It's like the air we breathe. It's so ubiquitous that we don't notice it, but it's very powerful. It's very healing. It's very helpful to us. It has the power to teach us, to show us how to live our lives skillfully, how to avoid unskillful actions. And not only that, it can take us to the place where we become completely free from the ways in which we react to the world and suffer.

So when I say that mindfulness helps to show us what's skillful and unskillful, let me offer a brief definition of what I mean by these terms.

Unskillful mind states are those that lead us more deeply into suffering. They tend to produce unskillful actions and cause all kinds of repercussions and difficulties in our lives. Anger, for instance, tends to be an unskillful mind state. It leads to unskillful actions, to things we regret, things we wish we hadn't done. Skillful mind states, on the other hand, are those that lead us away from suffering. These tend to be motivated by non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

Now, this is not a moral judgment about what is good and bad. It's really a very pragmatic exploration. What is it that leads us to suffering? What is it that makes us unhappy and frustrated and impatient and angry in our lives? What leads to those unskillful mind states, and what leads us out of them? That's the definition of skillful and unskillful—what helps us get away from suffering, or what takes us into suffering.

So how does mindfulness help to teach us about this? How does this very ordinary quality of mind that happens all the time actually teach us?

Part of what allows mindfulness to show us this is that we need to sustain it over a period of time. That's a little more challenging. That's not something that happens so naturally—that's the concentration aspect of our practice. But when we can sustain that mindfulness, just that very simple ordinary quality of mind, what starts happening is that we begin to notice the ramifications of our actions, the ramifications of our mind states.

For instance, if you pay attention to an unskillful mind state such as anger, if you're mindful of that state, you start to see pretty quickly that it's an unpleasant experience. Not only does it lead to unpleasant consequences often, but it itself is an unpleasant experience in the moment. So we start to see with

mindfulness that this is something that is not so helpful to us.

And actually, we don't really have to do much with that knowledge. We don't necessarily even have to try to abandon the anger the next time it comes up. We may, and it can take time—this can be a process. But over time, what starts to happen is that the mind will abandon these unskillful states simply because it sees the suffering. It knows where it's headed, and it goes, "I don't think so." Once it starts to see where it's headed, once it really knows through experience—through mindful experience—the suffering that results from that mind state, it lets go of it almost automatically. Again, that can take some time, but mindfulness will lead us that way. Simply paying attention to our experience will lead us that way. So that's how unskillful mind states are abandoned through mindfulness.

How about skillful ones? If we pay attention to skillful mind states like compassion, generosity, loving-kindness, equanimity, and tranquility, we begin to see that they benefit us, that they function and serve us well in the present moment. So again, the mind will incline more naturally toward those states once they are known in mindfulness. It's almost like magic. It felt like magic to me when I first started experiencing this happening. But it's just a very simple, natural effect of bringing mindfulness to our experience. It creates the conditions for unskillful, unwholesome mind states to arise less frequently in the future, and it creates the conditions for skillful, wholesome mind states to arise more frequently.

Mindfulness is kind of like a wedge. It cuts through our experience and shows us the way. It shows us the path through our experience, away from the unwholesome and towards the wholesome.

It's said that there's a list called the seven factors of awakening, and mindfulness is the first on the list. The others are investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. And it's said that if you simply bring mindfulness to experience, the others will follow. It's kind of like the prow of a boat in the water, and the other qualities follow in its wake. Mindfulness is a very skillful, very wholesome mind state to cultivate, and yet it's a very ordinary quality in our life. It's nothing rarefied or obscure—just a very simple quality of mind. All that it takes is noticing it, actually paying attention to when it happens. Notice when you're mindful.

Just that piece—noticing when you're mindful—will have a great impact on developing the cultivation of this wholesome quality of mind, so that it appears more frequently for us. This very ordinary quality of mind, mindfulness, is well worth our attention. I think it was really the brilliance of the Buddha to highlight this quality of mind, to say this is worth cultivating.

So that's the ordinariness of the quality of mindfulness. And now I'd like to talk a little bit about the ordinariness of our experience itself.

The Buddha had several ways of describing what we are as a person, what we are as a psychophysical being. I'll talk about two of those main ways. One is called the teaching on the six sense doors, and one is called the teaching on the five aggregates.

The teaching on the six sense doors is basically a way of dividing up the body and the mind to describe what we are, how we experience our world. The six sense doors in Buddhist psychology are basically the five usual sense doors that we consider—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching—plus the sense door of the mind, which is what in Buddhist psychology is known as the sixth sense.

Basically, our whole experience comes to us through these six sense doors. We experience sights through the eye, sounds through the ear, smells through the nose, tastes through the tongue, and touch through the skin. And we experience thoughts and emotions through our mind.

There's an analogy about these six sense doors that my teacher in Burma gives. He uses an analogy of a match, a striker, and a flame. With each of these sense doors, the eye and the sight are two separate things. When they come together, when they meet, there is the consciousness of the seeing. So the eye is like the striker, the match is like the thing we're seeing, and when we strike the two together, there's the flame—and that's the consciousness of what is arising. Nothing that we experience can't be found in one of these six sense doors.

Again, this is very ordinary—these are just what we experience all the time throughout our day. One of my teachers, Joseph Goldstein, likes to say with some regularity: only six things ever happen. That's all that ever happens to us. Seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and things arising in the mind. It doesn't much matter for the purposes of mindfulness what we bring our attention to. It's simply seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and experiencing things in our mind.

Now, we happen to like certain configurations of seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and thoughts in the mind better than we like other ones. That's something we need to work with. But for the purposes of mindfulness, for the cultivation of mindfulness, and for waking up, it really makes absolutely no difference what is happening in our experience.

The Buddha actually taught this in one sutta, and I love this sutta. It's got a nice poetic quality, and it's short, so I'll read it to you. The title of this sutta is "The Roots of Everything," and he says:

All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom. Their essence, liberation. All things merge in the deathless, and nibbāna, or freedom, is their culmination.

All things he's talking about—not simply blissful states and concentration, not simply states of clarity. All things lead to liberation. All things culminate in nibbāna. There's no part of our normal everyday experience that is not worth paying attention to. The ordinariness, the very ordinariness of our experience can be the ground for our freedom, for our waking up.

As we start to see this process of life—just this seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and things happening in the mind—as we start to see this happen, we begin to get a sense that this whole thing is just

a process. It's really just an ever-changing flow of things happening. Things appear, they disappear.

Things arise and pass away. Over and over again, things come and go, come and go, come and go through these six sense doors. And when we start to get a taste for the flavor of just this process happening, we begin to see that there's not really anybody there doing anything. Seeing sees. Hearing hears. Thinking thinks. Knowing knows.

This recognition frees us from some of our identification with our experience. And this identification, where we latch onto something and say "this is mine"—that's where a lot of our suffering comes from. Because when we've identified with something and said "this is mine," the law of impermanence is going to take it away from us at some point. And we will suffer for that.

Even the coalescing of a particular identity. "I'm a dancer," for instance. I used to be a dancer. I'm a dancer. I can no longer dance, so I'm no longer a dancer. The loss of that identity for me was really painful. It was an extremely painful process of grieving, for years. So there's suffering around this identification.

At one point on a retreat, I began to experience this quality of just the process, just things happening and nobody there doing anything, simply things happening by themselves. And I was quite surprised at how incredibly relieving it was. When I had originally heard this teaching of not-self, this teaching of there's nobody really here, it was a little bit scary. It's not something that we tend to really want to agree with or say is true. It strikes us as so wrong, so horrible to conceive of not being here. It's like death. We think of it like death.

But in my actual experience of it, it was a huge relief to not have that be there. I came back and reported it to my teacher, and he kind of smiled and said, "No self, no problem." And it was really true.

So the second of the teachings around the psychophysical being is the teaching on the five aggregates. An aggregate is a technical-sounding term, but the Pali term for this is *khandha*—or *skandha* in Sanskrit. And the term *khandha* in Pali means "heap" or "bundle." You would carry a *khandha* of sticks with you. It's that kind of general term. So this term in Pali is not terribly technical. It's simply heaps of things.

The Buddha identified these five heaps of things that make us up. And what I like about this teaching in contrast to the six sense spheres is that the six sense spheres focus on the body. Seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching are five-sixths of the six sense spheres, and the mind is one of them. In the teaching on the aggregates, it's reversed. There are five aggregates, and four of them have to do with how the mind is broken into parts, different functions of the mind. And one of the five aggregates is the body. So it's exactly reversed in some ways, allowing us to explore our psychophysical being either in more fine detail in our body or in more fine detail in our mental experience.

These five aggregates are: the body, as I mentioned, and the other four—consciousness, perception, feeling, and what are sometimes called mental formations. Consciousness is just the quality of mind that

knows, just the simple bare knowing part. Perception is the part of our mind that recognizes what we're knowing. It's connected to memory. So it's the part of our mind that recognizes, "Oh, this is a white piece of paper," or "this is hardness," or "this is a clock." There are many levels of perception. There's the perception of very bare experience down to the level of just vibration and heat and cold. And there's the perception of person, carpet, wood, floor. All of these things are perception.

The feeling part is whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. And that's a very basic, fundamental quality of our experience.

It happens in every single moment of experience that every sense contact either has some quality of pleasant, some quality of unpleasant, or some quality of neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

Built on top of those three, consciousness is kind of the base, essentially. It's the place where we first meet our experience. Then there's the recognition of what it is and the feeling about what it is. Built on top of those bare aspects of experience is a whole array of reactions—thoughts and feelings and moods. Just about everything else you can imagine in your mind goes into that heap. That's the mental formations piece. And then there's the body.

This teaching for me is not simply intellectual. It's actually something I pay attention to in my actual experience. I find it particularly helpful in looking at all the reactivity we have, which is mostly in that area of the formations, the mental formations. As we start to pay attention to our actual experience, we begin to contact just the bare sensations of pressure, vibration, coolness, heat. The closer we get to those sensations, the closer we are to the bare knowing of experience.

Consciousness is kind of the base, as I said. On top of that are perception and feeling. Those three together—you can't really separate them. In fact, the Buddha said you can't really separate these three qualities. I'll read to you what he said about that, because for me it was a revelation. I kept trying to work out how these are different, how they separate, what the separation is between these three.

He's responding to a question. Somebody asks, "Feeling, perception, and consciousness—are these states conjoined or disjoined? And is it possible to separate each of these states from the other in order to describe the difference between them?"

The Buddha replies, "Feeling, perception, and consciousness, friend—these states are conjoined, not disjoined. And it is impossible to separate each of these states from the other in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives. And what one perceives, that one cognizes."

So we really can't tease these apart completely. But it's like looking at three different facets of the same object. There's either the pleasant-unpleasant aspect, there's the recognition aspect, or there's just the bare knowing aspect. Anytime we're contacting either the feeling of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, or we're contacting the perception of heat, cool, hard, soft—anytime we're contacting those things, we're getting

close to the actual quality of knowing, the consciousness that's underneath.

As we begin to actually experience and touch into this direct quality of knowing, we start to see that it has some beautiful qualities. It's clear. It's luminous. It's non-judgmental. Again, this is simply happening in our experience all the time. Every single moment of our experience has this consciousness, this knowing, this perception, this feeling. Every single moment has these things.

This is just something that's happening all the time. But as we can begin to touch into the fact that it is happening, we can start to see and feel and experience these actual qualities of consciousness itself. Consciousness doesn't judge what it experiences. It simply illuminates it. It simply shines the light of knowing on it.

It's kind of like a mirror. You can know something about the reflective qualities of a mirror. You can know how good the mirror is by how clearly it reflects. But it doesn't matter what it's reflecting. It can be reflecting a decaying corpse or it can be reflecting a beautiful landscape. The quality of the reflecting is unchanged. That's the way consciousness functions. It does not care what it's knowing. Its function is simply to know.

As we can touch in more, we can begin to experience the fact that everything is just things arising in our experience. Everything is just coming and going.

So how do we learn to see this knowing? How do we learn to touch into this quality of knowing? I think I talked about this the last time I was here. Some of you may remember, but one of the best ways I know of to begin to touch into this quality of knowing is to notice the moment when you come back from wandering in your meditation. See if you can really touch into that point. What happens?

What's the difference in your experience in that moment when you become mindful again? You can't really know what it's like to not be mindful. But in that moment of waking up, there's a lingering memory of what it was like. So there's a little bit of contrast, and you can begin to sense: what is it like? What does it actually feel like to be awake? What does this presence, this sense of being awake, feel like?

Can you feel it in your life, just right now? Can you feel a sense of presence, of being awake?

For me, this was difficult. When teachers were talking about feeling what it feels like to be present, I had no idea what they were talking about—for years. It was through this exercise of looking at what it's like to come back from being lost that I began to understand. Oh, this is what it feels like to be awake. Wow, this is amazing. There's a clarity here, a clearness to my experience.

Paying attention to that moment has particular benefits. One benefit I found was that it really cut through the whole judging thing about getting lost, because every time I got lost it became an opportunity to see this difference. So it was a great exercise for me, at least. I highly recommend it. It was very powerful.

Another way to begin looking at the knowing is to pay attention to our ordinary experience. When we're

sitting here, or brushing our teeth, or eating a meal, or driving on the freeway—very ordinary experience—when it's kind of neutral, that's a good time to check in: what does it feel like to be awake? What does it feel like to be present? Because there's not so much pulling us into the experience itself.

When you're brushing your teeth, for example, you can feel all the sensations, but it doesn't tend to be too exciting or too unpleasant. It's just kind of a thing that's happening every day. But if we can bring our attention to what it feels like to pay attention to that, we can start to recognize this quality of knowing.

It's helpful to use these more neutral experiences because when things are either really wonderful or really horrible, we tend to get caught in the thing itself. When we're experiencing great states of happiness and bliss, it's kind of hard to ask, "Well, what does it feel like to be experiencing this?" Or when we're experiencing really unpleasant experience—again, we tend to be more focused on the actual experience. So look at your everyday, ordinary, mundane experience and see if you can notice what it means to be awake in those experiences.

This quality of knowing, paying attention to this awake, will begin to accumulate and help to wake you up in a way that is inestimable. It really is something we have to work at and experience to know the value of it. But I'm trying to communicate some of that value to you.

Another way to begin keying into the knowing is this: if you can—and this first happened to me when I was paying attention to something somewhat unpleasant—you might notice that there are kind of two states happening in your mind at the same time. There was aversion happening, and I was noticing how unpleasant the aversion was. But then at some point, I began noticing that I was knowing the aversion. And when I noticed that I was knowing the aversion, I noticed that it was neutral. There wasn't a pleasant or unpleasant quality to the knowing. The knowing itself is neutral. If you can begin to key into that, you'll start to get a taste for that knowing quality. In our experience, if something is unpleasant, aversion is unpleasant—but the knowing of it is neutral. See if you can tune into that neutral quality of the knowing.

So far I've talked about the ordinariness of mindfulness and the ordinariness of just our experience, and how we can start to wake up through this ordinariness. The last thing I'd like to talk about tonight is a state of mind I ran into on a three-month retreat I did last fall.

I was doing a different form of practice. I've injured my back a little bit, and I can't do sitting meditation for nineteen hours a day the way I used to. I can't do the slow walking meditation. So I'm lying on my back to do my still posture, and I'm doing pretty fast walking in walking practice. At one point, I began noticing in my walking meditation that I was just paying attention to pretty much everything that was happening. I wasn't trying to do a detailed awareness of the contact of the foot, the lifting of the foot, the touching of the foot. It was just a whole bunch of stuff happening.

I went and reported this to Joseph, and he said, "When you're doing walking meditation and you're doing a kind of choiceless awareness in the way that you describe, the thing I found most helpful is to put your

attention here, in the area of the heart, and pay attention to the knowing."

So that was the instruction he gave me. I went off and tried it, doing my walking meditation. I put my attention in the heart and just paid attention. I wasn't sure what he meant by paying attention to the knowing in the heart, but I put my attention here and just noticed what was happening. And the thing that became most obvious to me was clarity of mind. There was just this incredible clearness and brilliance of what was happening.

There was completely ordinary consciousness, completely ordinary perception. It wasn't as if in earlier times on retreats, when I was doing very slow walking and sitting meditation, things would get broken up into all these little bits. I would see consciousness become completely different, and the perception of what you're experiencing becomes entirely unlike normal everyday consciousness.

But what I ran into on this retreat was a completely ordinary consciousness that was completely clear, completely present. It was really quite extraordinary.

This quality of awakeness can be a very beautiful quality of mind. We can bring this quality of awakeness to our daily life. Having touched into it on retreat, I can now experience it in my daily life, and it's quite extraordinary. Part of the reason it's so extraordinary—this incredibly ordinary state of experience, just walking through a room—and yet brilliantly clear. That brilliantly clear part feels quite extraordinary.

Part of the reason it feels extraordinary is because there's a continuity of the knowing that's coming. And that continuity of the knowing of experience puts you into a state of mind where there are no longer any unwholesome mind states arising. No anger, no greed, no delusion is arising. And that state itself is quite an amazing state. The term for that state of mind is the bliss of seclusion, because we are secluded from all of those difficult mind states. That state of continual knowing, even in just a very ordinary state of consciousness, can take us into the bliss of seclusion. So it feels quite extraordinary.

There's a poem that I'd like to share with you that celebrates this extraordinariness of this completely ordinary experience. Some of you have probably heard this before, but it's worth reading and hearing again. It's called "The Spontaneous Vajra Song" from Venerable Lama Gendun Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher.

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already present in open relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself. There is nothing to do or undo. Whatever momentarily arises in the body-mind has no real importance at all, has little reality whatsoever. Why identify with and become attached to it, passing judgment upon it and ourselves?

Far better to simply let the entire game happen on its own, springing up and falling back like waves, without changing or manipulating anything. And notice how everything vanishes and reappears magically, again and again, time without end.

Only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it. It is like a vivid rainbow which you pursue without ever catching, or a dog chasing its own tail. Although peace and happiness do not exist as an actual thing or place, it is always available and accompanies you at every instant.

Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences. They are like today's ephemeral weather, like rainbows in the sky. Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you open and relax this tight fist of grasping, infinite space is there—open, inviting, and comfortable.

Make use of this spaciousness, this freedom and natural ease. Don't search any further looking for the great awakened elephant who is already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth. Nothing to do or undo, nothing to force, nothing to want, and nothing missing.

Emaho! Marvelous. Everything happens by itself.

This very simple, very ordinary quality of mind feels extraordinary, and yet over time what happens is that it too becomes ordinary. Nothing special, very simple. We come back to our life but simply with clarity. And this is a space, a non-suffering space that we can live from. We can live from this space and begin to free ourselves from suffering.

So we have a few minutes if there are any comments or questions.

Can you comment on the practice of listening to the sensation of breath?

Yes. In the hearing meditation that I guided you through, there can be a kind of receptive quality to the hearing where there's no effort. Really, we don't have to try to hear something because—just as you're listening to me—it's almost automatic that the ear hears. So hearing tends to be a receptive, open, spacious type of practice.

That style of attention can also be brought to the sensations in our body. Only what tends to happen—at least for me, what tended to happen—was that I tried to feel the experiences. It's almost like I was trying to construct the sensations of pressure, trying to really get in there. And yet when I began to explore it as though I was hearing the sensations, more receiving them—the sensations are happening already, kind of like the sounds are just happening—it's a matter of just directing our attention there and seeing what's there without any trying.

This is coming to that really effortless type of mindfulness. Mindfulness itself doesn't take much effort. It's right here, right now—you can hear me. What takes the effort is simply doing it over and over and over again.

So if we can tap into that receptive quality that happens in hearing, it can be helpful to let us relax and have less striving around attending to the sensations in our body.

I found that using the language of "hearing the body" came to me because when I was in the Peace Corps, I

was in a country in the South Pacific that used a pidgin language. It used English words, but basically in this pidgin form. And their term for both hearing and feeling was "harem," which basically meant "to hear." So it occurred to me that maybe we could use that languaging—hearing our sensations—to get a sense of that ease and receptivity of mindfulness.

Regarding whether the Buddha spoke about selfless action, I can't think of any specific passage that comes to mind right now. But in my experience, what happens is that as there is less self in the way, the experience is more naturally responsive. You know that if something happens—somebody falls down or is about to be hit by a car—there's just automatically this movement to pull them back. There's a kind of automatic movement of wholesome activity that can happen when our self isn't in the way. So it's a paradox in some ways. It's not quite like having a sense of self-responsibility, but there's more of the action of responsibility that happens when we don't have all of those identifications.

A question arises about the five khandhas and the difference between that which is aware and consciousness. Is there something observing consciousness, or is consciousness that which is doing the observing? Well, this is one of the key conundrums of Buddhism, and different schools answer it different ways. Some say there is a kind of pure consciousness that knows the knowing. Some say that a previous moment of consciousness is known by the next moment of consciousness—so it's a different moment of consciousness, but it's the same type of thing.

But really, I think what we need to do is just look at our own experience and not try to get caught up in what it actually is. Sometimes to me it feels like there's a big knowing that just seems to know everything. Other times, things seem very much broken up into little bits. The practice is not to try to make our experience fit into one model or the other, but just to know what is happening right now. What is actually happening? I've always found that to be my mantra. If I get confused, it's like, well, what is actually happening?

Another question arises about whether the aggregates of consciousness, feeling, and perception are subject to distortion. I have experienced that those states of perception and feeling can be distorted through all the other stuff. One example: I was on a retreat one time and walked into a room, and across the room I saw a shape. I watched the mind attempt to perceive this. It ran through a bunch of different things trying to figure out what it was. "Oh, it's distorted. What is it?" It was like a horrible being. It took me a number of different tries before I realized it was a vase of flowers. I was seeing just form and color for a while. The perception itself was not really kicking in; it wasn't recognizing it. So that's one way it can be distorted.

Another way is that through emotions, our feelings—the perception of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—can be distorted. If we're angry about something, maybe everything we experience has an unpleasant feeling tone. I've noticed that at times. So there can be these filters. But I think at the core, at the base, they're pretty pure. What happens is that in all of the mental formations is where the distortion actually occurs.

May the beneficial effects of our practice together be offered to support the welfare and liberation of all beings everywhere.

May all beings be happy.
May all beings be healthy.
May all beings be safe.
May all beings live with ease.
May all beings be free.

Thank you for your attention.

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