Why vs. What

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 55:28

I'm very happy to be here with you tonight and hope that I can share some of what I've learned on my path with you.

The title of my talk tonight is "What Versus Why?" The idea for this talk came from a time when I was giving a talk to a group like this on the hindrances—those difficult qualities of mind that we often encounter when we're meditating: states of greed, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. After the talk, somebody asked me, "When you're working with these difficult states of mind, is it ever useful to ask why they're happening?"

That evening, I gave him a short answer given the time constraints I had. But in reflecting on that question over the next couple of weeks, I realized that it's a very rich question. So that's what I'd like to talk about tonight: this issue of asking why versus looking at what we're actually experiencing.

As a general rule in this culture, we tend to be really skilled at evaluating our experience and asking ourselves where things have come from in our lives, why we are the way we are. Perhaps because of the influence of Freud and Jung and the whole culture of psychological analysis, we are pretty skilled at that. Many of us know, to some extent, that we are the way we are because of certain conditions and causes from our background, our history. This idea of asking why we are the way we are in an intellectual way is very ingrained in our culture. We're very good at this practice; we've engaged in a lot of this asking why we are the way we are.

I think it's helpful to also explore other ways of looking at our experience, other ways of exploring what's going on for us—perhaps a non-intellectual, non-verbal, non-conceptual way of exploring our experience.

When we look at this question of why—why are we the way we are, why do we suffer, why do I get stuck in this habit that I continually fall into even though I know it's not good for me—when we ask that question of why, often we get pulled into thoughts about it. We start thinking about our history, about how our parents raised us, about the relationships we've had with people. We often can come up with some reason why we are the way we are, and we sometimes mistakenly think that intellectual understanding can help to undercut these patterns or help us avoid getting into those kinds of situations where we suffer.

I find that this kind of intellectual reflection can sometimes help. In my own experience, I can see that if I'm in a state of agitation or anger or some kind of difficult mind state, a thought about it can help to reduce it somewhat. It can help me to not act out on anger if I think, "Well, it's really not such a good thing

to do, and I don't really have a good reason to be angry. I know this is coming from my conditioning." So it can be helpful to make those kinds of reflections.

But in my experience, what I found is that this kind of intellectual understanding doesn't really touch the habit we have around that particular kind of suffering. I had a very strong anger habit, and even knowing about it intellectually didn't really cut into the fact that it kept happening. In a particular instance, I could think about things and refrain from getting too unskillful about how I acted in that situation, but the actual pattern of anger just kept coming.

So what I'd like to suggest is that there is another way we can pay attention to our experience that can actually help to undercut these patterns and deeply cut into the habits that lead us into suffering.

What is the way out of this kind of reactivity? In the suttas that the Buddha spoke, which have been recorded in the Pali texts, he gives some instruction about this way out of reactivity. I'd like to read this to you. This is actually one of my favorite suttas. I'll just read excerpts from it because these things can tend to be long.

"An untaught ordinary person does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention, and he does not attend to those things fit for attention. This is how he attends unwisely: 'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?' Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present."

Thus: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?

A well-taught noble disciple understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he does not attend to those things unfit for attention, and he attends to those things fit for attention. He attends wisely: This is suffering. He attends wisely: This is the cause of suffering. He attends wisely: This is the cessation of suffering. He attends wisely: This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

When I first read this, those four things that the Buddha says a well-taught disciple attends to—those are the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha's teaching. This is suffering. This is the cause of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. When I first read this, I didn't really understand what it meant. It just sounded like the person who is well trained simply thinks about the Four Noble Truths all the time, and I didn't really connect with what it actually meant.

But what he's pointing to in this teaching is that when we're untaught, when we're unskilled, we are focused on these questions of why. Why am I this way? How did I become this? How can I become this in the future? Will I become? We're focused on all of these questions of cause, of why and wherefore.

What the Buddha is pointing to in this teaching—that a skilled disciple attends to "this is suffering, this is the cause of suffering"—he's pointing us into the present moment. He's suggesting that all of our experience, everything that we experience, can be seen essentially through one of the lenses of these four aspects of truth. Either we're experiencing suffering, we're experiencing the cause of suffering (the wanting things to be different than they are), we're experiencing the ending of suffering (something where suffering is disappearing), or we're experiencing the path leading to the ending of suffering.

So he's pointing us into the present moment saying: look at your present moment experience. Notice when you are suffering in your present moment experience. Notice when you are experiencing the cause of suffering in your present moment experience.

Suffering actually occurs right now. It doesn't occur in the past. It doesn't occur in the future. If we are suffering over something that occurred in the past, we are suffering right now with thoughts that are arising about the past. We're suffering in the present moment because thoughts about the past are arising in the present moment.

I had a really clear demonstration of this on one retreat. It had to do with a particular memory coming up over and over again. That memory was about some years ago when I was in a play. I had a role in the play, and one evening during a performance, I forgot my line. I tried fudging, making up lines, because I couldn't remember the line I was supposed to give. I just threw out lines, hoping that either I would remember my line or that the other people on the stage would pick up the cue and help me out—go on or something. Hopefully something would happen. But after four or five things that I made up, I ran out of things to say. And nobody said anything. There was this big gaping silence, looking out at the audience and realizing: wow, they're waiting for something to happen here. It was really unpleasant. It was really embarrassing. It felt pretty bad.

Well, on this retreat, that moment, for some reason, came up many, many times over and over again. I remembered staring out at the audience and felt the embarrassment all over again. Having seen it so many times on retreat where I was really paying attention to my experience, I noticed that the sequence of events was that there was a memory—an image actually appeared in my mind of looking out at the audience—

And then as a reaction to that memory, I got embarrassed all over again. I felt that embarrassment fully once more.

But what became clear to me on this retreat, having seen this sequence a number of times, was that it wasn't as if that embarrassment was waiting, lurking in my psyche somewhere, just ready to appear. It was actually being constructed right then and there in the present moment—because that thought arose and because I reacted to the thought. It was not necessary for that reaction to occur. That thought can appear in the mind, and has many times now since then, and I don't get embarrassed about it. So there's not an absolute direct link between the memory and the reaction to it. And in the present moment is

where we can dismantle that. It's the only place we have that opportunity.

So not only does the suffering occur in the present moment, but also the cause of our suffering—the wanting things to be different, wanting things to be other than they are, wanting to have something we don't have or wanting to get rid of something that we do have. Even though some of the events that lead to our suffering might have occurred in the past, the suffering and the cause of suffering actually occur right now, in the present moment.

Here's another example of this. I was in the Peace Corps at one point and had a relationship that broke up while I was there. After we broke up, I started noticing that I was going to bed lonely every night. It didn't particularly surprise me that I was going to bed feeling lonely. I thought, why would I be lonely? Because I've just broken up with my boyfriend. It did not strike me as odd. So I wasn't particularly curious about the why in this case. But I was just observing what was happening in my experience. I started paying attention to what was going on for me. I started looking at the what of my experience. And so each night as I went to bed, I would just observe what was happening.

I began to notice that the loneliness started when I set my alarm clock.

I thought that was really weird. What did that have to do with anything? But I was just watching. So I kept noticing and watched this pattern over several nights. And one night while I was setting the alarm clock, I noticed a thought in my mind. The thought was about my ex-boyfriend. We were in Disneyland looking up at a marquee. We were in Tomorrowland, and we were looking up at a marquee that had a digital clock on it.

I could see the connection between the memory and what I was doing. And I could also see that the loneliness resulted from a reaction to that memory. There was a sense of, "Oh, wasn't that a happy time?" And, "Oh, I'm never going to have those happy times again." That's where the loneliness came from—a reaction to that thought. It didn't particularly have to do with going to bed alone. It had to do with reacting to a memory in the present moment.

But what surprised me even more was the next night. I went to bed, was setting my alarm clock, and I remembered the thought because I had seen it clearly the night before. I remembered that thought, and I didn't get lonely. I was really surprised by that. I think, looking back at it, that the seeing—the clear seeing that the loneliness had been caused by a reaction to the thought—had the power to dismantle the reactivity just through the seeing of it. And so that every-evening loneliness didn't return. Now I'm not saying I never got lonely again. Definitely not saying that. But that regular every-night going-to-bed feeling lonely—that stopped.

So this is an example of looking at our experience, just looking at what is actually happening, what is actually going on in our experience. And what I saw was a chain of events in the mind that triggered the loneliness. By looking at the what of my present moment experience, I saw the why of the present

moment experience. It didn't have anything to do with the fact that I'd had this relationship. Well, it did of course have something to do with having had the relationship, but it didn't have so much to do with the history of the relationship. The why had to do with the reaction in the present moment. It was not automatic that I had to react to that thought in that way.

So the why of my experience was essentially revealed by looking at what I was experiencing. The present moment experience opened this up for me.

Beginning to witness our reactivity in the present moment can help us get some space around it and become a little less reactive. Now, it doesn't always happen so quickly—you know, I see this thing one night and the next night the suffering, the loneliness, disappears. But that kind of observation can open up a space around our reactivity and give us some breathing room. We get to see the causes and conditions. Why is it arising in the present moment?

I want to contrast for a moment the difference between the why of history and the why of the present moment. I touched on this in the last example, but I want to make it really clear.

If I go back to the example of the play, the why of history had to do with the fact that I'd been in that play, that I'd forgotten my line that night, and that I'd gotten incredibly embarrassed about it. The why of the present moment was related to that—the memory of looking out at the audience would never have arisen had that not happened. And probably the reaction of embarrassment was also conditioned by something in my history. But the fact that I was reacting, that the actual embarrassment was caused right then, right then in the present moment—it wasn't the old embarrassment coming up. It was actually created right then and there. That's what I mean by the difference between the why of the present moment and the why of our history.

So how do we look at this what of our experience? I really think this is a key for us in our mindfulness practice. Our mindfulness practice opens us up to what is happening right now. What am I experiencing? And if we can observe that and let go as much as possible of asking the question why, we get closer and closer into the actual felt experience, the actual lived experience, and it can start to reveal to us the causes of our reactivity.

What is actually happening right now? A lot of what happens for us in our experience is emotions, thoughts, body sensations. That's a large part of what we experience moment to moment. And we often, particularly around emotions, want to understand why. Why are they happening? But if we look into our present moment experience, there's a whole range of information that we often miss because we're so hooked into our thoughts about the experience—our thoughts of why is this happening? What did they say? How did they say it? How could I have done this differently? We're so hooked into the thoughts, and we think that's the way we're going to solve our problems. We think that's the way out. And there is some truth to that—it can help us. But what I'm suggesting is that there's also a whole host of additional information in our experience that we often neglect because we're not trained at observing it.

If we can come into our physical experience—and the body is an excellent place to do this, whether we're experiencing emotions or thoughts—the body is a great place to check in. What does the body feel like in the present moment? How does the body experience this emotion? That can help take us out of the thoughts we're turning in if we come into the body and pay attention to it.

Emotions usually have some kind of physical manifestation in the body. And if we can tune into that physical manifestation, we're in the present moment and we're not getting caught in the narrative or the thoughts around the emotion, which tend to exacerbate the problem. The thoughts often fuel it and turn us up more. So if we can let go of the thoughts and come into the bodily experience, we get a double benefit: we're in the present moment, and we have let go of the things that tend to increase the problem.

Another really good thing to check into in terms of the what of our experience is whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Just noticing: is this thing that's happening a pleasant experience? Is it an unpleasant experience? It's a very basic kind of knowledge, very basic information. And sometimes we can actually be surprised when we look at things. Things that we think should be pleasant, like excitement, can be a little bit unpleasant when we actually notice them. There's a little bit of spinning, a little bit of agitation and churning in the body. So look at what is pleasant and particularly what is unpleasant.

When we look at the what of the experience, sometimes the why of the experience is just revealed to us. There was a time about a year ago when a student came up to me after one of my introductory classes. It was his first introductory class, his first introduction to meditation. He told me that he was having panic attacks. He was a scientist and had a strong training in looking for the why.

That's what he did as a scientist—to look for why does this happen, what's the cause of this? And so when his panic attacks came up, the way he worked with them was to ask himself, or to point out to himself, that there was no reason why he should be feeling panic.

Sometimes this can help with panic attacks, to actually use our reason, to use our rationality, to notice that there's nothing happening, that I'm not in immediate danger—to really use our consciousness, our conscious thoughts, to help attenuate a particular panic attack. But he was finding that they just kept coming.

So I suggested to him, I said, "I'm going to ask you another question. Rather than asking yourself, 'Why is this happening?' or pointing out to yourself why this shouldn't be happening, just ask yourself: What is happening right now? What is this experience?"

He was actually able to do this quite quickly. I was surprised at how readily he took this instruction in. But sometimes suffering like that can really be a powerful motivator.

So he started noticing what was happening. He said, "I noticed the tension in my neck, the tightness in my jaw, and then I'd feel this rising of sensation." And over the course of some months of paying attention to

what was happening, he began to notice that it wasn't nearly as intense when he was simply attending to what was happening. He actually began to notice some of the triggers, some of the beginnings of the panic attack. And just staying right with what was happening in the moment, often the panic attacks would simply dissipate.

Some months ago, he actually reported to me that he hadn't had a panic attack in a long time. This was a shift—the shift from looking at the why, or trying to reason his way through it, to just experiencing what is happening. It had a huge effect on his experience.

Sometimes when we look at our present moment experience, as I've talked about, the why of the present moment can be very clearly seen when we're attending to our present moment experience. And sometimes the why of history can also be seen. We can also learn or get a connection with what's the historical pattern, or what's the historical cause, of this event. But it's not actually necessary to see that historical why. It's mostly necessary to see what is happening in the present moment and to notice the reactivity in the present moment. That alone is enough to dismantle our suffering.

Sometimes if we're looking for the why of experience—this habit we have of looking for why things are the way they are—we can mislead ourselves. We can come up with explanations that may or may not be true.

There's a really strong connection between the mind and the body, particularly where emotions are concerned. Emotions express themselves in the body as physical experience. So if an emotion appears, it expresses itself as a physical experience. But also physical experiences themselves can trigger an emotion.

As an aside, I'd like to share with you some research that actually demonstrates this. The researchers were surprised at how close the connection is between the mind and body with respect to emotions. This was done by Paul Ekman and Richard Davidson, who have done quite a lot of work with emotions. Richard Davidson in particular has done a lot of work on the neuropsychology and neurology of meditation.

They did this research on emotions, and Paul Ekman said, "In the course of our research, we found something that surprised us. If you intentionally make a facial expression, you change your physiology. By making the correct expression, you begin to have changes in your physiology that accompany the emotion." This was seen both in work on bodily physiology and in some of the work that Richard Davidson was doing on changes in the brain. "The face is not simply a means of display, but it's also a means of activating emotion." In other words, simply putting the face into a smile drives the brain into activity typical of happiness, just as a frown does with sadness.

So if you need a hit of happiness, put a smile on your face and see what happens. According to the research, it works.

This connection between the mind and the body is really powerful, and it can be misleading. It can mislead us sometimes into making erroneous judgments. I noticed this in my own meditation when I'd

notice a particular physical pattern appear in the body. The pattern generally was one that felt kind of familiar—a familiar set of contractions, perhaps contraction in the throat and tightening around the heart. There was a feeling that was very familiar.

And I noticed that when particular contractions happened, the mind would start scanning, trying to figure out why. Why is it feeling this way? What is happening? What is this emotion? Often it would leap to a conclusion that it was a particular emotion, and then start scanning the environment for why that emotion was coming up.

So sometimes these particular patterns, these habits, or the contractions in the body—it's like we have habits of mind. I know you're all familiar with this idea: habits of ways that we do things, ways that we think, particular ways that we react to things. We have habits of mind, but those can also translate into habits of body.

If you are prone to anger, for instance, as I was, then any time the body kind of reached into something close to an anger state, the mind could start figuring out it was angry. But actually it was just the body. It was a habitual contraction in the body that was happening. It wasn't particularly that I was angry, but given that habitual state of the body, the mind would create the anger out of it—because it figured it had to be angry, looking around the environment. *Why am I angry?* I could almost always come up with some reason why I was angry, some person that had done something.

So this looking for the why, which can be kind of automatic for us, can lead us into states—it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy almost. If we can just notice what is happening: *Oh, there's contraction in my throat. There's a heaviness around my heart.* What does it mean? We don't actually need to do that part. If we can just rest with the sensations. If there is an emotion there, often the paying attention to the *what* will show us what that emotion is. And if we're paying attention to the *what*, we may also see some kind of thoughts or triggers for it. So if we just keep with the *what*, we're less likely to make this kind of leap into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I have an example from my practice that ties all these different aspects of *what* and *why* together. I'd like to share this experience with you. It unfolded over quite a long time—it was a three-month retreat.

One of my strongest patterns in my history, along with anger, was around self-hatred and unworthiness. And during this one particular retreat, for some reason that was up for me. I was experiencing a lot of self-hatred, a lot of feeling of not being worthy of doing this practice. So I began to explore it, to look at it.

Now this particular pattern of self-hatred and unworthiness—I had some idea already through a lot of therapy that it had to do with a particular relationship from my early life. I knew that kind of intellectually; there was a connection between these feelings and that relationship. But I hadn't really had a direct experience, a real direct connection. It was all intellectual. I could see how things had unfolded and it made sense to me, but it wasn't an actual direct experience of knowing that connection.

So during this retreat I began to see more clearly that that relationship was connected to those experiences through this exploration of *what*—seeing the pattern of how those thoughts about the relationship would lead to the feelings of self-hatred and unworthiness. I had some clear direct experiences that connected the relationship with the feelings.

At one point, I felt a huge release of compassion for this person, for the way that they had acted that caused my suffering. And to some extent there was some compassion for myself for being the recipient of that. There was a huge release around it.

But that release—I guess I call that a psychological insight because there was a clear understanding of the connection between the relationship and the feelings of self-hatred. What continued to happen on the retreat, however, was that the self-hatred and unworthiness kept coming up. It was not lessened at all by this psychological insight.

This kind of surprised me because I'd had such a huge release around it. It felt so cathartic to have that experience of forgiveness and compassion. That person—I no longer had that kind of resentment towards them. But it didn't touch the habit of self-hatred and unworthiness.

It did do something helpful though. It actually was a profound experience, and I began to see over time the role that that psychological insight played. Because over the next few weeks, paying attention to self-hatred and unworthiness, I began to see that I was no longer quite so reactive when it came up. It still came up. It was still very strong. But there wasn't quite so much resistance to it.

It was more like, "Oh yeah, this is just causes and conditions. This is just the fact that this relationship happened and this is the result." So I stopped resisting the experience, which made it much easier to be present for the experience of self-hatred and unworthiness. It's a really hard thing to pay attention to because it feels so unpleasant. It feels so horrible to hate yourself. But I could see that the psychological insight had given me a much easier way of paying attention to the present moment. So having some insight into the psychological why—a psychological insight into the why—helped me more than the intellectual understanding of the why. But it still didn't really cut into the habit.

So I just continued observing, just continued observing the self-hatred and unworthiness. And I remember so clearly one night, I left the meditation hall and I was fine, no problem. As I walked up the stairs out of the meditation hall, the self-hatred descended and I was powerless. Even seeing the pattern begin, it was so strong. The habit towards that pattern was so strong. I was powerless to touch it. All that I could do was just witness it. And so I witnessed it.

I went back to my room and it was getting to be bedtime, the last part of the day. And I just decided, "I'm not going to go to bed until I have seen this really, really clearly." Fortunately that evening—I thought very fortunately—Joseph Goldstein had given the dharma talk and he'd given an instruction on how to pay attention to something that was really sticky, really hard for us. He'd suggested that noting the pleasant or

unpleasant aspect of the experience was a key piece of it. So noticing what the feeling of it was: Is it pleasant or unpleasant? Well, this was clearly unpleasant. But he also said that's often not enough with something really sticky, that you have to note the moment you feel that unpleasant hit. Contact. Note the contact of that experience and then note the unpleasant.

So that's what I was doing in the meditation. I was noticing that the feeling of self-hatred kind of varied. It would subtly go away and then it would come back, subtly go away and then come back. So I was noting every time I saw the least little tendency towards that self-hatred with that contact, unpleasant, contact, unpleasant.

And at one moment I saw that the self-hatred was just a thought. It was simply a thought in the mind, an ephemeral thought. What I actually saw was the ephemerality of thought itself—just that it was like mist, like a vanishing vapor. Seeing that so clearly just cut into the self-hatred instantly. In the next moment, the body was flooded with bliss. And the next moment was this recognition: this insight is impermanent. Even though I've seen this clearly, it doesn't mean that self-hatred is gone. Because that bliss was kind of this feeling of "oh, never again." But the next moment was some wisdom that said, "You know, this too is impermanent." And the next moment was just more of a balance around the fact that, yep, this comes and goes.

While it is true that that pattern is not completely obliterated in my psyche, that moment of insight—and I would call that a meditative insight, a vipassana insight, that seeing really clearly the insubstantiality of the thought—that had the power actually to cut really deeply into that pattern. In the next couple of years after that moment, I didn't experience self-hatred or unworthiness for a couple of years. After that point, I began seeing the very vaguest little tendrils of the pattern of mind, the one that said, "You're no good. You're a failure." The thought would come up: "You're a failure, you're no good." But what has happened, or what that moment seemed to have done, is to cut the belief in that thought. The pattern of the thinking is there, but I no longer believe it.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with this idea of a rut in the mind. It's like if we have these habits and patterns of how we do things and we get anywhere near that habit, it's like this ball drops into this deep rut and there's no way to get it out. That was the way my self-hatred had felt, like it was this deep, deep rut in my mind. And that moment of seeing clearly—it felt like the rut went from there to there.

So now it's no longer so hard for that ball to get out of the rut.

This takes courage—being present with our experience, being present with what is happening for us. But as we do it, as we actually witness what's happening, we start to see that it's the way out of our suffering.

Actually, the first thing we start to see is that it's somewhat easier. It's less suffering to be present for our experience than to be caught in it. It's less suffering to be aware of anger and self-hatred than it is to just be caught in it and continuing to feed the pattern. So there's that immediate benefit. And we also start to

see through these moments of witnessing that this is actually the way out. We have to go in to get out, essentially. We have to go through in order to break the patterns.

When asked about what it means to "contact" our experience, I want to clarify something. It can be enough to just look at pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, depending on how difficult the situation is. What Joseph was saying was that when things are really sticky, it's often not enough to just note that something is unpleasant. We have to know when that experience actually starts. It's like noticing the beginning, keeping the mind so focused that you notice right when that experience begins. For me, I was looking for any little movement of thought or contraction that was heading in that direction, and I would just note: contact, unpleasant.

As for whether retreats are necessary—it's different for different people. I was an intractable case. I think I needed the long retreats. But I know people who seem to have a very intuitive grasp of this and for whom a daily practice is enough to really begin to explore and open to these things. I can't put a blanket statement on it. I think that retreats are immensely helpful—immensely, immensely helpful—if you have any chance to go on even a week-long retreat. It's very supportive of really beginning to see how we can contact our experience and be non-reactive to it and ride it out. We have much more time to play with it on retreat. So I find it immensely valuable, but I can't say that it is necessary.

Someone shared that in other traditions of meditation, the approach often seemed to assume you could leave your history at the door. What they found valuable was this understanding that while insight has certain benefits, there's also a behavioral aspect of being with our patterns as they gradually change. I appreciate that reflection. It's immensely helpful to know what we're bringing into the room. We can't really leave it behind—it comes with us. So we allow it.

Regarding trauma and meditation, there is a really wonderful teacher on just this topic. His name is Peter Levine, and he's developed a great tool called Somatic Experiencing. Some of you may have heard of it. There's a wonderful book he wrote called *Waking the Tiger*, which you might be interested in. He uses mindfulness techniques, but the key with trauma is this: if you've had a traumatic experience, you need to take care, because if you get close to it, you can get sucked right into it. Mindfulness tends to be not quite strong enough to allow you to just observe trauma without being overwhelmed.

So the technique—and it's a substantial technique—but one of the basic aspects is to cultivate a grounding. This might be the contact of your body with the floor or chair, or even a thought you can go to that calms you down, something that allows you to just gently approach the trauma. Then, before you get too close to it, you return to that grounding experience. This isn't to ignore or push away the trauma, but rather a way of allowing yourself to connect more deeply with your meditative or mindful state so that you can then go back and maybe go just a little bit deeper into that space—and then return again. You do this gentle back and forth.

Sometimes you really need to spend considerable time cultivating the resources first—the grounding, the

place where you can feel comfortable in your body. That's the first priority, like building concentration. Get yourself to a place where you can reliably come back to stability. And then you may want to just bring up a thought of the trauma.

Then notice just what happened to your body and immediately return to that grounding experience. It becomes a kind of gentle back and forth, a dance between touching the difficult and returning to stability.

If you're interested in this approach, I strongly recommend doing some research in this area or taking courses on it. It can be very helpful for working with trauma in a safe and supported way.

May the benefit of our practice together this evening be offered to support the welfare and liberation of all beings everywhere. As we move out into the rest of our evening, may the people we contact benefit from our time here together.

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 from suffering.

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